

Science Fantasy

No. 47
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Novelettes
**THE
DREAMING
CITY**
Michael Moorcock

**THE
VEIL OF ISIS**
John Rackham

**BLOOD
OFFERING**
John Kippax

Short Story
**VALLEY OF THE
RAINBIRDS**
W. T. Webb

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This is the first of a new series of stories by a new author to our pages. Unlike many central characters, Elric is puny on his own, but as a wanderer in another place and time he has the power of sorcery to boost his strength.

THE DREAMING CITY

BY MICHAEL MOORCOCK

Introduction

For ten thousand years did the Bright Empire of Melniboné flourish—ruling the World. Ten thousand years before history was recorded—or ten thousand years after history had ceased to be chronicled. For that span of time, reckon it how you will, the Bright Empire had thrived. Be hopeful, if you like, and think of the dreadful past the Earth has known, or brood upon the future. But if you would believe the unholy truth—then Time is an agony of Now, and so it will always be.

Ravaged, at last, by the formless terror called Time, Melniboné fell and newer nations succeeded her: Ilmiora, Sheegoth, Maidahk, S'aaleem. Then history began: India, China, Egypt, Assyria, Persia, Greece, and Rome—all these came after Melniboné. But none lasted ten thousand years.

And none dealt in the terrible mysteries, the secret sorceries of old Melniboné. None used such power or knew how. Only Melniboné ruled the Earth for a hundred centuries—and then, even she, shaken by the casting of frightful runes, attacked by powers greater than men; powers who decided that Melniboné's span of ruling had been overlong—then she crumbled and her sons were scattered. They became wanderers across an Earth which hated and feared them, siring few offspring, slowly dying, slowly forgetting the secrets of their mighty ancestors. Such a one was the cynical, laughing Elric, a man of bitter brooding and gusty humour, proud Prince of ruins, Lord of a lost and humbled people; last son of Melniboné's sundered line of kings.

Elric, the moody-eyed wanderer—a lonely man who fought a world, living by his wits and his runesword *Stormbringer*. Elric, last Lord of Melniboné, last worshipper of its grotesque and beautiful Gods—reckless reaver and cynical slayer—torn by great griefs and with a knowledge locked in his skull which would turn lesser men into babbling idiots. Elric, moulder of madresses, dabbler in wild delights . . .

o n e

"What's the Hour?" The black-bearded man wrenched off his gilded helmet and flung it from him, careless of where it fell. He drew off his leathern gauntlets and moved closer to the roaring fire, letting the heat soak into his frozen bones.

"Midnight is long past," growled one of the other armoured men who gathered around the blaze. "Are you still sure he'll come?"

"It's said that he's a man of his word, if that comforts you."

It was a tall, pale-faced youth who spoke. His thin lips formed the words and spat them out maliciously. He grinned a wolf-grin and stared the new arrival in the eyes, mocking him.

The newcomer turned away with a shrug. "That's so—for all your irony, Yaris. He'll come." He spoke as a man does when he wishes to reassure himself.

There were six men, now, around the fire. The sixth was Smiorgan—Count Smiorgan Baldhead of the Purple Towns. He was a short, stocky man of fifty years with a scarred face

partially covered with a thick, black growth of hair. His eyes smouldered morosely and his lumpy fingers plucked nervously at his rich-hilted longsword. His pate was hairless, giving him his name, and over his ornate, gilded armour, hung a loose woollen cloak dyed purple.

"For all his haughtiness and fine promises, I think Elric's our man," Smiorgan said thickly. "Once he gives his word, we can trust him."

"You're full of trust tonight, Count," Yaris smiled thinly, "A rare thing to find in these troubled times. I say this—" He paused and took a long breath, staring at his comrades, summing them up. His gaze flicked from lean-faced Darmit of Jharkor to Fadan of Lormyr who pursed his podgy lips and looked into the fire.

"Speak up, Yaris," petulantly urged the patrician-featured Vilmirian, Naclon. "Let's hear what you have to say, lad, if it's worth hearing."

Yaris looked towards Jiku the dandy, who yawned impolitely and scratched his long nose.

"Well!" Smiorgan was impatient. "What d'you say, Yaris?"

"I say that we should start now and waste no more time waiting on Elric's pleasure! He's laughing at us in some tavern a hundred miles from here—or else plotting with the Dragon Princess to trap us. We have little time in which to strike—our fleet is too big, too noticeable. Even if Elric has not betrayed us, then spies will soon be running Eastwards to warn the Dragons that there is a fleet massed against them. We stand to win a fantastic fortune—to vanquish the greatest merchant city in the world—to reap immeasurable riches—or horrible death at the hands of the Dragon Princes, if we wait overlong. Let's bide our time no more and set sail before our prize hears of our plan and brings up reinforcements!"

"You always were too ready to mistrust a man, Yaris." King Naclon of Vilmiria spoke slowly, carefully—distastefully eyeing the taut-featured youth. "We could not reach Imrryr without Elric's knowledge of the maze-channels which lead to its secret ports. If Elric will not join us—then our endeavour will be fruitless—hopeless. We need him. We must wait for him—or else give up our plans and return to our homelands."

"At least I'm willing to take a risk," yelled Yaris, anger lancing from his slanting eyes. "You're getting old—all of you. Treasures are not won by care and forethought but by swift slaying and reckless attack."

"Fool!" Darmit's voice rumbled around the fire-flooded hall. He laughed wearily. "I spoke thus in my youth—and lost a fine fleet soon after. Cunning and Elric's knowledge will win us Imrryr—that and the mightiest fleet to sail the Sighing Sea since Melniboné's banners fluttered over all the nations of the Earth. Here we are—the most powerful Sea Lords in the world, masters, every one of us, of more than a hundred swift vessels. Our names are feared and famous—our fleets ravage the coasts of a score of lesser nations. We hold *power!*" He clenched his great fist and shook it in Yaris' face. His tone became more level and he smiled viciously, glaring at the youth and choosing his words with precision.

"But all this is worthless—meaningless—without the power which Elric has. That is the power of knowledge—of sorcery, if I must use the cursed word. His fathers knew of the maze which guards Imrryr from sea-attack. And his fathers passed that secret on to him. Imrryr, the Dreaming City, dreams in peace—and will continue to do so unless we have a guide to help us steer a course through the treacherous waterways which lead to her harbours. We *need* Elric—we know it, and he knows it. That's the truth!"

"Such confidence, gentlemen, is warming to the heart." There was laughter and irony in the voice which came from the entrance to the hall. The six Sea Lords jerked towards the doorway, nervously.

Yaris' confidence fled from him as he met the eyes of Elric of Melniboné. They were old eyes in a fine featured, youthful face. Eyes which stared into eternity. Yaris shuddered, turned his back on Elric, preferring to look into the bright glare of the fire.

Elric smiled warmly as Count Smiorgan gripped his shoulder. There was a certain friendship between the two. He nodded condescendingly to the other four and walked with lithe grace towards the fire. Yaris stood aside and let him pass. Elric was tall, broad-shouldered and slim-hipped. He wore his long hair bunched and pinned at the nape of his

neck and, for an obscure reason affected the dress of a Southern barbarian. He had long, knee-length boots of soft doe-leather, a breastplate of strangely-wrought silver, a jerkin of chequered blue and white linen, britches of scarlet wool and a cloak of rustling green velvet. At his hip rested his runesword of black iron—the feared *Stormbringer*, forged by an ancient and alien sorcerer when Melniboné was young.

His bizarre dress was tasteless and gaudy, and did not match his sensitive face and long-fingered, almost delicate hands, yet he flaunted it since it emphasised the fact that he did not belong in any company—that he was an outsider and an outcast. But, in reality, he had little need to wear such outlandish gear—for his face and hands were enough to mark him.

Elric, Last Lord of Melniboné, was a pure albino who drew his power from a secret and terrible source.

Smiorgan sighed. "Well, Elric, when do we raid Imrryr?"

Elric shrugged. "As soon as you like; I care not. Give me a little time in which to do certain things."

"Tomorrow? Shall we sail tomorrow?" Yaris said hesitantly, conscious of the strange power dormant in the man he had earlier accused of treachery.

Eric smiled, dismissing the youth's statement. "Three day's time," he said. "Three—or more."

"Three days! But Imrryr will be warned of our presence by then!" Fat, cautious Fadan spoke.

"I'll see that your fleet's not found," Elric promised. "I have to go to Imrryr first—and return."

"You won't do the journey in three days—the fastest ship could not make it," Smiorgan gaped.

"I'll be in the Dreaming City in less than a day," Elric said softly, with finality.

Smiorgan shrugged. "If you say so, I'll believe it—but why this necessity to visit the city ahead of the raid?"

"I have my own compunctions, Count Smiorgan. But worry not—I shan't betray you. I'll lead the raid myself, be sure of that." His dead-white face was lighted eerily by the fire and his red eyes smouldered. One lean hand firmly gripped the hilt of his runesword and he appeared to breathe more heavily. "Imrryr fell, in spirit, five hundred years ago—she will fall completely soon—for ever! I have a little debt to settle. This is my only reason for aiding you. As you know I have made only a few conditions—that you raze the city to

the ground and a certain man and woman are not harmed. I refer to my cousin Yyrkoon and his sister Cymoril . . .”

Yaris’s thin lips felt uncomfortably dry. Much of his blustering manner resulted from the early death of his father. The old sea-king had died—leaving young Yaris as the new ruler of his lands and his fleets. Yaris was not at all certain that he was capable of commanding such a vast kingdom—and tried to appear more confident than he actually felt. Now he said: “How shall we hide the fleet, Lord Elric?”

The Melnibonéan acknowledged the question. “I’ll hide it for you,” he promised. “I go now to do this—but make sure all your men are off the ships first—will you see to it, Smiorgan?”

“Aye,” rumbled the stocky Count.

He and Elric departed from the Hall together, leaving five men behind; five men who sensed an air of icy doom hanging about the overheated hall.

“How could he hide such a mighty fleet when we, who know this fjord better than any, could find nowhere?” Dharmit of Jharkor said bewilderedly.

None answered him.

They waited, tensed and nervous, while the fire flickered and died untended. Eventually, Smiorgan returned, stamping noisily on the boarded floor. There was a haunted haze of fear surrounding him; an almost tangible aura, and he was shivering terribly. Tremendous, racking undulations swept up his body and his breath came short.

“Well? Did Elric hide the fleet—all at once? What did he do?” Dharmit grated impatiently, choosing not to heed Smiorgan’s ominous condition.

“He has hidden it.” That was all Smiorgan said, and his voice was thin, like that of a sick man, weak from fever.

Yaris went to the entrance and tried to stare beyond the fjord slopes where many campfires burned, tried to make out the outlines of ship’s masts and rigging, but he could see nothing.

“The night mist’s too thick,” he murmured, “I can’t tell whether our ships are anchored in the fjord or not.” Then he gasped involuntarily as a white face loomed out of the clinging fog. “Greetings, Lord Elric,” he stuttered, noting the sweat on the Melnibonéan’s strained features.

Elric staggered past him, into the hall. "Wine," he mumbled, "I've done what's needed and it's cost me hard."

Dharmit fetched a jug of strong Cadsandrian wine and with a shaking hand poured some into a carved wooden goblet. Wordlessly he passed the cup to Elric who quickly drained it. "Now I will sleep," he said, stretching himself into a chair and wrapping his green cloak around him. He closed lids over his disconcerting scarlet eyes and fell into a slumber born of utter weariness.

Fadan scurried to the door, closed it and pulled the heavy iron bar down.

None of the six slept much that night and, in the morning, the door was unbarred and Elric was missing from the chair. When they went outside, the mist was so heavy that they soon lost sight of one another, though scarcely two feet separated any of them.

Elric stood with his legs astraddle on the shingle of the narrow beach. He looked back at the entrance to the fjord and saw, with satisfaction, that the mist was still thickening, though it lay only over the fjord itself, hiding the mighty fleet. Elsewhere, the weather was clear and overhead a pale winter sun shone sharply on the black rocks of the rugged cliffs which dominated the coastline. Ahead of him, the sea rose and fell monotonously, like the chest of a sleeping water-giant, grey and pure, glinting in the cold sunlight. Elric fingered the raised runes on the hilt of his black broadsword and a steady North wind blew into the voluminous folds of his dark green cloak, swirling it around his tall, lean frame.

The albino felt fitter than he had done on the previous night when he had expended all his strength in conjuring the mist. He was well-versed in the art of nature-wizardry, but he did not have the reserves of power which the Sorcerer Emperors of Melniboné had possessed when they had ruled the world. His ancestors had passed their knowledge down to him—but not their mystic vitality and many of the spells and secrets that he had were unusable, since he did not have the reservoir of strength, either of soul or of body, to work them. But for all that, Elric knew of only one other man who matched his knowledge—his cousin Yyrkoon. His hand gripped the hilt tighter as he thought of his cousin and he forced himself to concentrate on his present task—the speak-

ing of spells to aid him on his voyage to the Isle of the Dragon Masters whose only city, Imrryr the Beautiful, was the object of the Sea Lords' massing.

Drawn up on the beach, a tiny sailing-boat lay—Elric's own small ship, sturdy and far stronger, far older, than it appeared. The brooding sea flung surf around its timbers as the tide withdrew, and Elric realised that he had little time in which to work his helpful sorcery.

His body tensed and he blanked his conscious mind, summoning secrets from the dark depths of his soul. Swaying, his eyes staring unseeingly, his arms jerking out ahead of him and making unholy signs in the air, he began to speak in a sybillant monotone. Slowly the pitch of his voice rose, resembling the scrawly heard shriek of a distant gale as it comes closer—then, quite suddenly, the voice rose higher until it was howling wildly to the skies and the air began to tremble and quiver. Shadow-shapes began slowly to form and they were never still but darted around Elric's body as, stiff-legged, he started forward towards his boat.

His voice was inhuman as it howled insistently, summoning the wind elementals—the *sylphs* of the breeze; the *sharnahs*, makers of gales; the *h'Haarshanns*, builders of whirlwinds—hazy and formless, they eddied around him as he summoned their aid with the alien words of his forefathers who had, ages before, made unthinkable pacts with the elementals in order to procure their services.

Still stiff-limbed, Elric entered the boat and, like an automaton, his fingers ran up the sail and set it. Then a great wave erupted out of the placid sea, rising higher and higher until it towered over the vessel. With a surging crash, the water smashed down on the boat, lifted it and bore it out to sea. Sitting blank-eyed in the stern, Elric still crooned his hideous, mind-juddering song of sorcery as the spirits of the air plucked at the sail and sent the boat flying over the water faster than any mortal ship could speed. And all the while, the deafening, unholy shriek of the released elementals filled the air about the boat as the shore vanished and open sea was all that was visible.

t w o

So it was, with wind-demons for shipmates, that Elric, last Prince of the Royal line of Melniboné, returned to the last city still ruled by his own race—the last city and the final remnant of Melnibonéan architecture. The cloudy pink and subtle yellow tints of her nearer towers came into sight within a few hours of Elric's leaving the fjord and just off-shore of the Isle of the Dragon Masters the elementals left the boat and fled back to their secret haunts among the peaks of the highest mountains in the world. Elric awoke, then, from his trance, and regarded, with fresh wonder, the beauty of his own city's delicate towers which were visible even so far away, guarded still by the formidable sea-wall with its great gate, the five-doored maze and the twisting, high-walled channels, one only of which led to the inner harbour of Imrryr.

Elric knew that he dare not risk entering the harbour by the maze, though he knew the route perfectly. He decided, instead, to land the boat further up the coast in a small inlet only he had knowledge of. With sure, capable hands, he guided the little craft towards the hidden inlet which was obscured by a growth of shrubs loaded with ghastly blue berries of a type decidedly poisonous to men since their juice first turned one blind and then slowly mad. This berry, the *nodoil*, grew only on Imrryr as did other rare and deadly plants.

Light, low-hanging cloud wisps streamed slowly across the sun-painted sky, like fine cobwebs caught by a sudden breeze. All the world seemed blue and gold and green and white, and Elric, pulling his boat up on the beach, breathed the clean, sharp air of winter and savoured the scent of decaying leaves and rotting undergrowth. Somewhere a bitch-fox barked her pleasure to her mate and Elric regretted the fact that his depleted race no longer appreciated natural beauty, preferring to stay close to their city and spend many of their days in drugged slumber. It was not the city which dreamed, but its overcivilised inhabitants. Elric smelling the rich, clean winter-scents, was wholly glad that he had renounced his birthright and did not rule the city as he had been born to do.

Instead, Yyrkoon, his cousin, sprawled on the Ruby Throne of Imrryr the Beautiful and hated Elric because he knew that the albino, for all his disgust with crowns and rulership, was still the rightful King of the Dragon Isle and that

he, Yyrkoon, was an usurper, not elected by Elric to the throne and this an illegal king by Melnibonéan tradition.

But Elric had better reasons for hating his cousin. Far better reasons. For those reasons Imrryr, the Isle's ancient capital, would fall in all its magnificent splendour and the last outpost of a glorious Empire would be obliterated as the pink, the yellow, the purple and white towers crumbled—if Elric had his way and the Sea Lords were successful.

On foot, Elric strode inland, towards Imrryr, and as he covered the miles of soft turf, the sun cast an ochre pall over the land and sank, giving way to a dark and moonless night, brooding and full of evil portent.

At last he came to the city. It stood out in stark black silhouette, a city of fantastic magnificence, in conception and in execution. It was the oldest city in the world, built by artists and conceived as a work of art rather than a functional dwelling place, but Elric knew that squalor lurked in many narrow streets and that the Lords of Imrryr, the Dragon Masters, of whom he was one, left many of the towers empty and uninhabited rather than let the bastard population of the city dwell therein. There were few Dragon Masters left ; few who could claim Melnibonéan blood.

Built to follow the shape of the ground, the city had an organic appearance, with winding lanes mounting like a chord of music up to the crest of the hill where stood the castle, tall and proud and many-spired, the final, crowning masterpiece of the ancient, forgotten artist who had built it. But there was no life-sound emanating from Imrryr the Beautiful, only a sense of soporific desolation. The city slept—and the Dragon Masters and their ladies and their special slaves dreamed drug-induced dreams of grandeur and incredible horror while the rest of the population, ordered by curfew, tossed on tawdry mattresses and tried not to dream of their squalid misery.

Elric, his hand ever near his sword-hilt, slipped through an unguarded gate in the city wall and began to walk cautiously through the unlighted streets, moving upwards, through the winding lanes, towards Yyrkoon's great palace.

Wind sighed through the empty rooms of the Dragon towers and sometimes Elric would have to withdraw into places where the shadows were deeper when he heard the tramp of feet and a group of guardsmen would pass, their duty being to see that the curfew was rigidly obeyed. Often he would hear wild laughter

echoing from one of the few towers still occupied, still ablaze with bright torchlight which flung strange, disturbing shadows on the walls, often, too, he would hear a chilling scream and a frenzied, idiot's yell as some wretch of a slave died in obscene agony to please his master.

Elric was not appalled by the sounds and the dim sights. He appreciated them, and sometimes he would smile maliciously upon hearing a death-scream. He was a Melnibonéan. To his mind that gave him the right to enjoy what would shock lesser mortals. He was still a Melnibonéan—their rightful leader if he chose to resume his powers of kingship—and though he had a lonely, obscure urge to wander and sample the less sophisticated pleasures of the outside world, ten thousand years of a cruel, brilliant and malicious culture was behind him and the pulse of his ancestry beat strongly in his deficient veins. He was a sorcerer and had shed blood in many devious ways in pursuit of his art.

Elric knocked impatiently upon the heavy, blackwood door. He had reached the palace and now stood by a small back entrance, glancing cautiously around him for he knew that Yyrkoon had given the guards orders to slay him if he entered Imrryr.

A bolt squealed on the other side of the door and it moved silently inwards. A thin, seamed face confronted Elric.

"Is it the king?" whispered the man, peering out into the night. He was a tall, extremely thin individual with long, knobby arms and legs which shifted awkwardly as he moved nearer, straining his beady eyes to get a glimpse of Elric.

"It's Prince Elric," the albino said, "But you forget, Tanglebones, my friend, that a new king sits on the Ruby Throne."

Tanglebones shook his head and his sparse hair fell over his face. With a jerking movement he brushed it back and stood aside for Elric to enter. "The Dragon Isle has but one king—and his name is Elric, whatever usurper would have it be otherwise."

Elric ignored this statement, but he smiled thinly and waited for the man to push the bolt back into place.

"She still sleeps, sire." Tanglebones murmured as he climbed unlit stairs, Elric behind him.

"I guessed that," Elric said. "I do not underestimate my good cousin's powers of sorcery."

Upwards, now, in silence, the two men climbed until at last they reached a corridor which was aflame with dancing torch-light. The marble walls reflected the flames whitely and showed Elric, crouching with Tanglebones behind a pillar, that the room in which he was interested was guarded by a massive archer—a eunuch by the look of him—who was alert and wakeful. The man was hairless and fat, his blue-black gleaming armour tight on his flesh, but his fingers were curled around the string of his short, bone bow and there was a slim arrow resting on the string. Elric guessed that this man was one of the crack eunuch archers, a member of the Silent Guard, Imrryr's finest company of warriors.

Tanglebones, who had taught the young Elric the arts of fencing and archery, had known of the guard's presence and had prepared for it. Earlier he had placed a bow behind the pillar. Silently he picked it up and, bending it against his knee, strung it. He fitted an arrow to the string, aimed it at the right eye of the guard and let fly—just as the eunuch turned to face him. The shaft missed. It clattered against the man's gorget and fell harmlessly to the reed-strewn stones of the floor.

So Elric acted swiftly, leaping forward, his runesword drawn and its alien power surging through him. It howled in a searing arc of black steel and cut through the bone bow which the eunuch had hoped would deflect it. The guard was panting and his thick lips were wet as he drew breath to yell. As he opened his mouth, Elric saw what he had expected, the man was tongueless and was a mute. His own shortsword came out and he just managed to parry Elric's next thrust. Sparks flew from the iron and *Stormbringer* bit into the eunuch's finely edged blade, he staggered and fell back before the nigromantic sword which appeared to be endowed with a life of its own. The clatter of metal echoed loudly up and down the short corridor and Elric cursed the fate which had made the man turn at the crucial moment. Grimly, swiftly, he broke down the eunuch's clumsy guard.

The eunuch saw only a dim glimpse of his opponent behind the black, whirling blade which appeared to be so light and which was twice the length of his own stabbing sword. He wondered, frenziedly, who his attacker could be and he thought that he recognised the face. Then a scarlet eruption obscured his vision, he felt searing agony clutch at his face and then,

philosophically, for eunuchs are necessarily given to a certain fatalism, he realised that he was to die.

Elric stood over the eunuch's bloated body and tugged his sword from the corpse's skull, wiping the mixture of blood and brains on his late opponent's cloak. Tanglebones had wisely vanished. Elric could hear the clatter of sandalled feet rushing up the stairs. He pushed the door open and entered the room which was lit by two small candles placed at either end of a wide, richly tapestried bed. He went to the bed and looked down at the raven-haired girl who lay there.

Elric's mouth twitched and bright tears leapt into his strange red eyes. He was trembling as he turned back to the door, sheathed his sword and pulled the bolts into place. He returned to the bedside and knelt down beside the sleeping girl. Her features were as delicate and of a similar mould as Elric's own, but she had an added, exquisite beauty. She was breathing shallowly, in a sleep induced not by natural weariness but by her own brother's evil sorcery.

Elric reached out and tenderly took one fine-fingered hand in his. He put it to his lips and kissed it.

"Cymoril," he murmured, and there was an agony of longing throbbing in that single name. "Cymoril—wake up."

The girl did not stir, her breathing remained shallow and her eyes remained shut. Elric's white features twisted and his red eyes blazed as he shook in terrible and passionate rage. He gripped the hand, so limp and nerveless, like the hand of a corpse ; gripped it until he had to stop himself for fear that he would crush the delicate fingers.

A shouting soldier began to beat at the door.

Elric replaced the hand on the girl's firm breast and stood up. He glanced uncomprehendingly at the door.

A sharper, colder voice interrupted the soldier's yelling.

"What is happening—has someone tried to see my poor sleeping sister?"

"Yyrkoon, the black hellspawn," said Elric to himself.

Confused babblings from the soldier and Yyrkoon's voice raised as he shouted through the door. "Whoever is in there—you will be destroyed a thousand times when you are caught. You cannot escape. If my good sister is harmed in any way—then you will never die, I promise you that. But you will pray to your Gods that you could!"

"Yyrkoon, you paltry rabble—you cannot threaten one who is your equal in the dark arts. It is I, Elric—your rightful master. Return to your rabbit hole before I call down every evil power upon, above, and under the Earth to blast you !"

Yyrkoon laughed hesitantly. "So you have returned again to try and awake my sister have you, Elric ?" he replied. "You will never succeed—only I possess the knowledge which will awaken her. Any attempt to do so on your part will not only slay her—it will send her soul into the deepest hell—where you may join it, willingly !"

"You offspring of a festering worm, Yyrkoon. You'll have cause to repent this vile spell before your time is run ! If you think you can stop Cymoril and I loving one another by a sleeping potion—then you are more than the babbling fool I know you to be ! By Arnara's six breasts, I swear to you—you it will be who samples the thousand deaths before long."

"Enough of this," answered Yyrkoon. "Soldiers—I command you to break this door down—and take the scum in there alive. Elric—there are two things you will never again have, this I swear to you—my sister's love and the Ruby Throne. Make what you can of the little time available to you, for soon you will be grovelling to me and praying for release from the agony your soul will experience."

Elric ignored Yyrkoon's threats and looked at the narrow window to the room. It was just large enough for a man's body to pass through. He bent down and kissed Cymoril upon the lips, then he went to the door and silently withdrew the bolts.

There came a crash as a soldier flung his weight against the door and, unyielding it swung open, pitching the man forward to stumble and fall on his face. Elric drew his sword, lifted it high and chopped at the warrior's neck. The head sprung from its shoulders and Elric yelled loudly in a deep, rolling voice.

"*Arioch ! Arioch !* I give you blood and souls—only aid me now ! This man I give you, mighty King of Hell—aid your servant, Elric of Melniboné !"

Three soldiers entered the room in a bunch. Elric struck at one and sheared off half his face. The man screamed horribly.

"*Arioch, Lord of the Darks—I give you blood and souls. Aid me, evil one !*"

In the far corner of the gloomy room, a blacker mist began, slowly, to form. But the soldiers pressed closer and Elric was hard put to hold them back.

He was screaming the name of Ariocho, Lord of the Higher Hell, incessantly, almost unconsciously as he was pressed back further by the weight of the warriors' numbers. Behind them, Yyrkoon mouthed in rage and frustration, urging his men, still, to take Elric alive. This necessity gave Elric some small advantage—that and the runesword *Stormbringer* which was glowing with a strange black luminousness and the shrill howling it gave out was grating into the ears of those who heard it. Two more corpses now littered the carpeted floor of the chamber, their blood soaking into the fine fabric.

"Blood and souls for my lord Ariocho!"

The dark mist heaved and began to take shape, Elric spared a look towards the corner and shuddered despite his inurement to hell-born horror. The warriors now had their backs to the thing in the corner and Elric was by the window. The amorphous mass heaved again and Elric made out its intolerably alien shape. Bile flooded into his mouth and as he drove the soldiers towards the thing which was sinuously flooding forward he fought against madness.

Suddenly, the soldiers seemed to sense that there was something behind them. They turned, four of them, and each screamed insanely as the black horror made one final rush to engulf them. Ariocho crouched over them, sucking out their souls. Then, slowly, their bones began to give and snap and still shrieking bestially the men flopped like obnoxious invertebrates upon the floor; their spines broken, they still lived. Elric turned away, thankful for once that Cymoril slept, and leapt to the window ledge. He looked down and realised with despair that he was not going to escape by that route after all. Several hundred feet lay between him and the ground. He rushed to the door where Yyrkoon, his eyes wide with fear, was trying to drive Ariocho back to the slime from which he had come. And he was succeeding.

Elric pushed past his cousin, spared a final glance for Cymoril, then ran back the way he had come, his feet slipping on blood. Tanglebones met him at the head of the dark stairway.

"What has happened, King Elric—what's in there?"

Elric seized Tanglebones by his lean shoulder and made him descend the stairs. "No time," he panted, "but we must hurry while Yyrkoon is still engaged with his current problem. In five days time Imrryr will experience a new phase in her

history—perhaps the last. I want you to make sure that Cymoril is safe. Is that clear.”

“Aye, Lord, but . . .”

They reached the door and Tanglebones shot the bolts and opened it.

“There is no time for me to say anything else. I must escape while I can. I will return in five days—with companions. You will realise what I mean when that time comes. Take Cymoril to the Tower of D’a’rputna—and await me there.”

Then Elric was gone, soft-footed, running into the night with the shrieks of the dying still ringing through the blackness after him.

three

Elric stood unspeaking in the prow of Count Smiorgan’s flagship. Since his return to the fjord and the fleet’s subsequent sailing for open sea, he had spoken only orders, and those in the tersest of terms. The Sea Lords muttered that a great hate lay in him, that it festered his soul and made him a dangerous man to have as comrade or enemy; and even Count Smiorgan avoided the moody albino.

The reaver prows struck eastward and the sea was black with light ships dancing on the bright water in all directions; they looked like the shadow of some enormous sea-bird flung on the water. Nearly half a thousand fighting ships stained the ocean—all of them of similar form, long and slim and built for speed rather than battle, since they were for coast-raiding and trading. Sails were caught by the pale sun; bright colours of fresh canvas—orange, blue, black, purple, red, yellow, light green or white. And every ship had sixteen or more rowers—each rower a fighting man. The crews of the ships were also the warriors who would attack Imrryr—there was no wastage of good man-power since the sea-nations were underpopulated, losing hundreds of men each year in their regular raids.

In the centre of the great fleet, certain larger vessels sailed. These carried great catapults on their decks and were to be used for storming the sea wall of Imrryr. Count Smiorgan and the other Lords looked at their ships with pride, but Elric only stared ahead of him, never sleeping, rarely moving, his white face lashed by salt spray and wind, his white hand tight upon his swordhilt.

The reaver ships ploughed steadily Eastwards—forging towards the Dragon Isle and fantastic wealth—or hellish horror. Relentlessly, doom-driven, they beat onwards, their oars splashing in unison, their sails bellying taut with a good wind.

Onwards they sailed, towards Imrryr the Beautiful, to rape and plunder the world's oldest city.

Two days after the fleet had set sail, the coastline of the Dragon Isle was sighted and the rattle of arms replaced the sound of oars as the mighty fleet hove to and prepared to accomplish what sane men thought impossible.

Orders were bellowed from ship to ship and the fleet began to mass into battle formation; then the oars creaked in their grooves and ponderously, with sails now furled, the fleet moved forward again.

It was a clear day, cold and fresh, and there was a tense excitement about all the men, from Sea Lord to galley hand, as they considered the immediate future and what it might bring. Serpent prows bent forwards the great stone wall which blocked off the first entrance to the harbour. It was nearly a hundred feet high and towers were built upon it—more functional than the lace-like spires of the city which shimmered in the distance, behind them. The ships of Imrryr were the only vessels allowed to pass through the great gate in the centre of the wall and the route through the maze—the exact entrance even—was a well-kept secret from outsiders.

On the sea wall, which now loomed tall above the fleet, amazed guards scrambled frantically to their posts. To them, threat of attack was well-nigh unthinkable, yet here it was—a great fleet, the greatest they had ever seen—come against Imrryr the Beautiful! They took to their posts, their yellow cloaks and kilts rustling, their bronze armour rattling, but they moved with bewildered reluctance as if refusing to accept what they saw. And they went to their posts with desperate fatalism, knowing that even if the ships never entered the maze itself, they would not be alive to witness the reavers' failure.

Divim Tarkan, Commander of the Wall, was a sensitive man who loved life and its pleasures. He was high-browed and handsome, with a thin wisp of beard and a tiny moustache. He looked well in the bronze armour and high plumed helmet; he did not want to die. He issued terse orders to his

men and, with well-ordered precision, they obeyed him. He listened with concern to the distant shouts from the ships and he wondered what the first move of the reavers would be. He did not wait long for his answer.

A catapult on one of the leading vessels twanged throatily and its throwing arm rushed up, releasing a great rock which sailed, with every appearance of calm grace, towards the wall. It fell short and splashed into the sea which frothed against the stones of the wall.

Swallowing hard and trying to control the shake in his voice, Divim Tarkan ordered his own catapult to discharge. With a thudding crash the release rope was cut and a retaliatory iron ball went hurtling towards the enemy fleet. So tightly packed were the ships that the ball could not miss—it struck full on the deck of the flagship of Dharmit of Jharkor and crushed the timbers in. Within seconds, accompanied by the cries of maimed and drowning men, the ship had sunk and Dharmit with it. Some of the crew were taken aboard other vessels but the wounded were left to drown.

Another catapult sounded and this time a tower full of archers was squarely hit. Masonry erupted outwards and those who still lived fell sickeningly to die in the foam-tipped sea lashing the wall. This time, angered by the deaths of their comrades, Imrryran archers sent back a stream of slim arrows into the enemy's midst. Reavers howled as red-fletched shafts buried themselves thirstily in flesh. But reavers returned the arrows liberally and soon only a handful of men were left on the wall as further catapult rocks smashed into towers and men, destroying their only war-machine and part of the wall besides.

Divim Tarkan still lived, though red blood stained his yellow tunic and an arrow shaft protruded from his left shoulder. He still lived when the first ram-ship moved intractably towards the great wooden gate and smashed against it, weakening it. A second ship sailed in beside it and, between them, they stoved in the gate and glided through the great entrance; the first non-Imrryran ships ever to do such a thing. Perhaps it was outraged horror that tradition had been broken which caused poor Divim Tarkan to lose his footing at the edge of the wall and fall screaming down to break his neck on the deck of Count Smiorgan's flagship as it sailed triumphantly through the gate.

Now the ram-ships made way for Count Smiorgan's craft, for Elric had to lead the way through the maze. Ahead of them loomed five tall entrances, black gaping maws all alike in shape and size. Elric pointed to the third from the left and with short strokes the oarsmen began to paddle the ship into the dark mouth of the entrance. For some minutes, they sailed in darkness.

"Flares!" shouted Elric, "Light the flares!"

Torches had already been prepared and these were now lighted. The men saw that they were in a vast tunnel hewn out of natural rock which twisted tortuously in all directions.

"Keep close," Elric ordered and his voice was magnified a score of times in the echoing cavern. Torchlight blazed and Elric's face was a mask of shadow and frisking light as the torches threw up long tongues of flame to the bleak roof. Behind him, men could be heard muttering in awe and, as more craft entered the maze and lit their own torches, Elric could see some torches waver as their bearers trembled in superstitious fear. Elric felt some discomfort as he glanced through the flickering shadows and his eyes, caught by torch-flare, gleamed fever-bright.

With dreadful monotony, the oars splashed onwards as the tunnel widened and several more cave-mouths came into sight. "The middle entrance," Elric ordered. The steersman in the stern nodded and guided the ship towards the entrance Elric had indicated. Apart from the muted murmur of some men and the splash of oars, there was a grim and ominous silence in the towering cavern.

Elric stared down at the cold, dark water and shuddered.

Eventually they moved once again into bright sunlight and the men looked upwards, marvelling at the height of the great walls above them. Upon those walls squatted more yellow-clad, bronze armoured archers and as Count Smiorgan's vessel led the way out of the black caverns, the torches still burning in the cool winter air, arrows began to hurtle down into the narrow canyon, biting into throats and limbs.

"Faster!" howled Elric. "Row faster—speed must be our only weapon, now!"

With frantic energy the oarsmen bent to their sweeps and the ships began to pick up speed even though Imrryran arrows took heavy toll of the reaver crewmen. Now the high-walled channel ran straight and Elric saw the quays of Imrryr ahead of him.

"Faster! Faster! Our prize is in sight!"

Then, suddenly, the ship broke past the walls and was in the calm waters of the harbour, facing the warriors drawn up on the quay. The ship halted, waiting for reinforcements to plunge out of the channel and join them. When twenty ships were through, Elric gave the command to attack the quay and now *Stormbringer* howled from its scabbard. The flagship's port side thudded against the quay as arrows rained down upon it. Shafts whistled all around Elric but, miraculously, he was unscathed as he led a bunch of yelling reavers on to land. Imrryran axe-men bunched forward and confronted the reavers, but it was plain that they had little spirit for the fight—they were too disconcerted by the course which events had taken.

Elric's black blade struck with frenzied force at the throat of the leading axe-man and sheared off his head. Howling demoniacally now that it had again tasted blood, the sword began to writhe in Elric's grasp, seeking fresh flesh in which to bite. There was a hard, grim smile on the albino's colourless lips and his eyes were narrowed as he struck without discrimination at the warriors.

He planned to leave the fighting to those he had led to Imrryr, for he had other things to do—and quickly. Behind the yellow-garbed soldiers, the tall towers of Imrryr rose, beautiful in their soft and scintillating colours of coral pink and powdery blue, of gold and pale yellow, white and subtle green. One such tower was Elric's objective—the tower of D'a'rputna where he had ordered Tanglebones to take Cymoril, knowing that in the confusion this would be possible.

Elric hacked a blood-drenched path through those who attempted to halt him and men fell back, screaming horribly as the runesword drank their souls.

Now Elric was past them, leaving them to the bright blades of the reavers who poured on to the quayside, and was running up through the twisting streets, his sword slaying anyone who attempted to stop him. Like a white-faced ghoul he was, his clothing tattered and bloody, his armour chipped and scratched, but he ran speedily over the cobble-stones of the twisting streets and came at last to the slender tower of hazy blue and soft gold—the Tower of D'a'rputna. Its door was open, showing that someone was inside, and Elric rushed through it and entered the large ground-floor chamber. No one greeted him.

"Tanglebones!" he yelled, his voice roaring loudly even in his own ears. "Tanglebones—are you here?" He leapt up the stairs in great bounds, calling his servant's name. On the third floor he stopped suddenly, hearing a low groan from one of the rooms. "Tanglebones—is that you?" Elric strode towards the room, hearing a strangled gasping. He pushed open the door and his stomach seemed to twist within him as he saw the old man lying upon the bare floor of the chamber, striving vainly to stop the flow of blood which gouted from a great wound in his side.

"What's happened man—where's Cymoril?"

Tanglebones' old face twisted in pain and grief. "She—I—I brought her here, master, as you ordered. But—" he coughed and blood dribbled down his wizened chin, "but—Prince Yyrkoon—he—he apprehended me—must have followed us here. He—struck me down and took Cymoril back with him—said she'd be—safe in the Tower of B'aal'nezbett. Master—I'm sorry . . ."

"So you should be," Elric retorted savagely. Then his tone softened. "Do not worry, old friend—I'll avenge you and myself. I can still reach Cymoril now I know where Yyrkoon has taken her. Thank you for trying, Tanglebones—may the long journey down the last river be a safe one."

He turned abruptly on his heel and left the chamber, running down the stairs and out into the street again.

The Tower of B'aal'nezbett was the highest tower in the Royal Palace. Elric knew it well, for it was there that his ancestors had studied their dark sorceries and conducted frightful experiments. He shuddered as he thought what Yyrkoon might be doing to his own sister.

The streets of the city seemed hushed and strangely deserted, but Elric had no time to ponder why this should be so. Instead he dashed towards the palace, found the main gate unguarded and the main entrance to the building deserted. This too was unique, but it constituted luck for Elric as he made his way upwards, climbing familiar ways towards the topmost tower.

Finally, he reached a door of shimmering black crystal which had no bolt or handle to it. Frenziedly, Elric struck at the crystal with his sorcerous blade but the crystal appeared only to flow and re-form. His blows had no effect.

Elric racked his mind, seeking to remember the single alien word which would make the door open. He dare not put himself in the trance which would have, in time, brought the

word to his lips, instead he had to dredge his subconscious and bring the word forth. It was dangerous but there was little else he could do. His whole frame trembled as his face twisted and his brain began to shake. The word was coming as his vocal chords jerked in his throat and his chest heaved.

"*Hsheegroiywnaz!*"

He coughed the word out and his whole mind and body ached with the strain.

"I command thee—open!"

He knew that once the door opened, then his cousin would be aware of his presence, but he had to risk it. The crystal expanded, pulsating and seething, and then began to flow out. It flowed into nothingness, into something beyond the physical universe, beyond time. Elric breathed thankfully and passed into the Tower of B'aal'nezbett. But now an eerie fire, chilling and mind-shattering was licking around Elric as he struggled up the steps towards the central chamber. There was a strange music surrounding him, uncanny music which throbbed and sobbed and pounded in his head.

Above him he saw a leering Yyrkoon, a black runesword also in his hand, the mate of the one in Elric's own grasp.

"Hellspawn!" Elric said thickly, weakly, "I see you have recovered *Mournblade*—well, test its powers against its brother if you dare. I have come to destroy you cousin."

Stormbringer was giving forth with a peculiar moaning sound which sighed over the shrieking, unearthly music accompanying the licking, chilling fire. The runesword writhed in Elric's fist and he had difficulty in controlling it. Summoning all his strength he plunged up the last few steps and aimed a wild blow at Yyrkoon. Beyond the eerie fire bubbled yellow-green lava, on all sides, above and beneath. The two men were surrounded only by the misty fire and the lava which lurked beyond it—they were outside the Earth and facing one another for a final battle. The lava seethed and began to ooze inwards, dispersing—no *engulfing* the fire.

The two blades met and a terrible shrieking roar went up. Elric felt his whole arm go numb and it tingled sickeningly. Elric felt like a puppet. He was no longer his own master—the blade was deciding his actions for him. The blade, with Elric behind it, roared past its brother sword and cut a deep wound in Yyrkoon's left arm. He howled and his eyes widened in agony. *Mournblade* struck back at *Stormbringer*, catching Elric in the very place he had wounded his cousin.

He sobbed in pain, but continued to move upwards, now wounding Yyrkoon in the right side with a blow strong enough to have killed any other man. Yyrkoon laughed then—laughed like a gibbering demon from the foulest depths of Hell. His sanity had broken at last and Elric now had the advantage. But the great sorcery which his cousin had conjured was still in evidence and Elric felt as if a giant had grasped him, was crushing him as he pressed his advantage, Yyrkoon's blood spouting from the wound and covering Elric, also. The lava was slowly withdrawing and now Elric saw the entrance to the central chamber. Behind his cousin another form moved. Elric gasped. Cymoril had awakened and, with horror on her face was shrieking at him.

The sword still swung in a black arc, cutting down Yyrkoon's brother blade and breaking the usurper's guard.

"Elric!" cried Cymoril desperately. "Save me—save me now, else we are doomed for eternity."

Elric was puzzled by the girl's words. He could not understand the sense of them. Savagely he drove Yyrkoon upwards towards the chamber.

"Elric—put *Stormbringer* away. Sheath your sword or we shall part again."

But even if he could have controlled the whistling blade, Elric would not have sheathed it. Hate dominated his being and he would sheathe it in his cousin's evil heart before he put it aside.

Cymoril was weeping, now, pleading with him. But Elric could do nothing. The drooling, idiot thing which had been Yyrkoon of Imrryr, turned at its sister's cries and stared leeringly at her. It cackled and reached out one shaking hand to seize the girl by her shoulder. She struggled to escape, but Yyrkoon still had his evil strength. Taking advantage of his opponent's distraction, Elric cut deep through his body, almost severing the trunk from the waist.

And yet, incredibly, Yyrkoon remained alive, drawing his vitality from the blade which still clashed against Elric's own rune-carved sword. With a final push he flung Cymoril forward and she died screaming on the point of *Stormbringer*.

Then Yyrkoon laughed one final cackling shriek and his black soul went howling down to hell.

The tower resumed its former proportions, all fire and lava gone. Elric was dazed—unable to marshal his thoughts. He looked down at the dead bodies of the brother and the sister.

He saw them, at first, only as corpses—a man's and a woman's.

Then dark truth dawned on his clearing brain and he moaned in grief, like an animal. He had slain the girl he loved. The runesword fell from his grasp, stained by Cymoril's lifeblood, and clattered unheeded down the stairs. Sobbing now, Elric dropped beside the dead girl and lifted her in his arms.

"Cymoril," he moaned, his whole body throbbing. "Cymoril—I have slain you."

f o u r

Elric looked back at the roaring, crumbling, tumbling, flame-spewing ruins of Imrryr and drove his sweating oarsmen faster. The ship, sail still unfurled, bucked as a contrary current of wind caught it and Elric was forced to cling to the ship's side lest he be tossed overboard. He looked back at Imrryr and felt a tightness in his throat as he realised that he was truly rootless, now; a renegade and a woman-slayer, though involuntarily the latter. He had lost the only woman he had loved in his blind lust for revenge. Now it was finished—everything was finished. He could envisage no future, for his future had been bound up with his past and now, effectively, that past was flaming in ruins behind him. Dry sobs eddied in his chest and he gripped the ship's rail yet more firmly.

His mind reluctantly brooded on Cymoril. He had laid her corpse upon a couch and had fired the Tower. Then he had gone back to find the reavers successful, straggling back to their ships loaded with loot and girl-slaves, jubilantly firing the tall and beautiful buildings as they went.

He had caused to be destroyed the last tangible sign that the grandiose, magnificent Bright Empire had ever existed. He felt that most of himself was gone with it.

Elric looked back at Imrryr and suddenly a greater sadness overwhelmed him as a tower, as delicate and as beautiful as fine lace, cracked and toppled with flames leaping about it.

He had shattered the last great monument to the earlier race—his own race. Men might have learned again, one day, to build strong, slender towers like those of Imrryr, but now the knowledge was dying with the thundering chaos of the

fall of the Dreaming City and the fast-diminishing race of Melniboné.

But what of the Dragon Masters? Neither they nor their golden ships had met the attacking reavers—only their foot-soldiers had been there to defend the city. Had they hidden their ships in some secret waterway and fled inland when the reavers overran the city? They had put up too short a fight to be truly beaten. It had been far too easy. Now that the ships were retreating, were they planning some sudden retaliation? Elric felt that they might have such a plan—perhaps a plan concerning dragons. He shuddered. He had told the others nothing of the beasts which Melnibonéans had controlled for centuries. Even now, someone might be unlocking the gates of the underground Dragon Caves. He turned his mind away from the unnerving prospect.

As the fleet headed towards open sea, Elric's eyes were still looking sadly towards Imrryr as he paid silent homage to the city of his forefathers and the dead Cymoril. He felt hot bitterness sweep over him again as the memory of her death upon his own sword-point came sharply to him. Then a muttering, like a roll of distant thunder, spread through the fleet and he wheeled sharply, intent on discovering the cause of the consternation.

Thirty golden-sailed Melnibonéan battle barges had appeared on both sides of the harbour, issuing from two mouths of the maze. Elric realised that they must have hidden in the other channels, waiting to attack the fleet when they returned, satiated and depleted. Great war-galleys they were, the last ships of Melniboné and the secret of their building was unknown. They had a sense of age and slumbering might about them as they rowed swiftly, each with four or five banks of great sweeping oars, to encircle the raven ships.

Elric's fleet seemed to shrink before his eyes until it seemed as though it were a bobbing collection of wood-shavings against the towering splendour of the shimmering battle barges. They were well-equipped and fresh for a fight, whereas the weary reavers were intensely battle-tired. There was only one way to save a small part of the fleet, Elric knew. He would have to conjure a witch-wind for sailpower. Most of the flagships were around him and he now occupied that of Yaris for the youth had got himself wildly drunk and had

died by the knife of an Imrryran tavern wench. Next to Elric's ship was that of Count Smiorgan and the stocky Sea Lord was frowning, knowing full well that he and his ships, for all their superior numbers, would not stand up to a sea-fight.

But the conjuring of winds great enough to move many vessels was a dangerous thing, for it released colossal power and the elementals who controlled the winds were apt to turn upon the sorcerer himself if he was not more than careful. But it was the only chance, otherwise the rams which sent ripples from the golden prows would smash the reaver ships to driftwood.

Stealing himself, Elric began to speak the ancient and terrible, many-vowelled names of the beings who existed in the air. Again, he could not risk the trance-state, for he had to watch for signs of the elementals turning upon him. He called to them in a speech that was sometimes high like the cry of a gannet, sometimes rolling like the roar of shore-bound surf, and the dim shapes of the Powers of the Wind began to flit before his blurred gaze. His heart throbbed horribly in his ribs and his legs felt weak. He summoned all his strength and conjured a wind which shrieked wildly and chaotically about him, rocking even the huge Melnibonéan ships back and forth. Then he directed the wind and sent it into the sails of some forty of the reaver ships. Many he could not save for they lay even outside his wide range.

But forty of the craft escaped the smashing rams and, amidst the sound of howling wind and sundered timbers, leapt on the waves, their masts creaking as the wind cracked into their sails. Oars were torn from the hands of the rowers, leaving a wake of broken wood on the white salt trail which boiled behind each of the reaver ships.

Quite suddenly, they were beyond the slowly closing circle of Melnibonéan ships and careering madly across the open sea, while all the crews sensed a difference in the air and caught glimpses of strange, soft-shaped forms around them. There was a discomfiting sense of evil about the beings which aided them, an awesome alienness.

Smiorgan waved to Elric and grinned thankfully.

"We're safe, thanks to you, Elric!" he yelled across the water. "I knew you'd bring us luck!"

Elric ignored him.

Now the Dragon Lords, vengeance-bent, gave chase. Almost as fast as the magic-aided reaver fleet were the golden barges of Imrryr, and some reaver galleys, whose masts cracked and split beneath the force of the wind driving them, were caught.

Elric saw mighty grapple-hooks of dully gleaming metal swing out from the decks of the Imrryan galleys and thud with a moan of wrenched timber into those of the fleet which lay broken and powerless behind him. Greek fire leapt from catapults upon the Dragon Lords' ships and careered towards many a fleeing reaver craft. Searing, foul-stinking flame hissed like lava across the decks and ate into planks like vitriol into paper. Men shrieked, beating vainly at brightly burning clothes, some leaping into water which would not extinguish the fire. Some sank beneath the sea and it was possible to trace their descent as, flaming even below the surface, men and ships fluttered to the bottom like blazing, tired moths.

Reaver decks, untouched by fire, ran red with reaver blood as the enraged Imrryan warriors swung down the grappling ropes and dropped among the raiders, wielding great swords and battle-axes and wreaking terrible havoc amongst the sea-ravens. Imrryan arrows and Imrryan javelins swooped from the towering decks of Imrryan galleys and tore into the panicky men on the smaller ships.

All this, Elric saw as he and his vessels began slowly to overhaul the leading Imrryan ship, flag-galley of Admiral Magum Colim, commander of the Melnibonéan fleet.

Now Elric spared a word for Count Smiorgan. "We've outrun them!" he shouted above the howling wind to the next ship where Smiorgan stood staring wide-eyed at the sky. "But keep your ships heading Westwards or we're finished!"

But Smiorgan did not reply. He still looked skyward and there was horror in his eyes; in the eyes of a man who, before this, had never known the quivering bite of fear. Uneasily, Elric let his own eyes follow the gaze of Smiorgan. Then he saw them.

They were dragons, without doubt! The great reptiles were some miles away, but Elric knew the stamp of the huge flying beasts. The average wingspan of these near-extinct monsters was some thirty feet across. Their snake-like bodies, beginning in a narrow-snouted head and terminating in a

dreadful whip of a tail, were forty feet long and although they did not breathe the legendary fire and smoke, Eric knew that their venom was combustible and could set fire to wood or fabric on contact.

Imrryran warriors rode the dragon backs. Armed with long, spear-like goads, they blew strangely shaped horns which sang out curious notes over the turbulent sea and calm blue sky. Nearing the golden fleet, now half-a-league away, the leading dragon sailed down and circled towards the huge golden flag-galley, its wings making a sound like lightning cracks as they beat through the air.

The grey-green, scaled monster hovered over the golden ship as it heaved in the white-foamed turbulent sea. Framed against the cloudless sky, the dragon was in sharp perspective and it was possible for Elric to get a clear view of it. The goad which the Dragon Master waved to Admiral Magum Colim was a long, slim spear upon which the strange pennant of black and yellow zig-zag lines was, even at this distance, noticeable. Elric recognised the insignia on the pennant.

Dyvim Tvar, friend of Elric's youth, Lord of the Dragon Caves, was leading his charges to claim vengeance for Imrryr the Beautiful.

Elric howled across the water to Smiorgan. "These are your main danger, now. Do what you can to stave them off!" There was a rattle of iron as the men prepared, near-hopelessly, to repel the new menace. Witch-wind would give little advantage over the fast-flying dragons. Now Dyvim Tvar had evidently conferred with Magum Colim and his goad lashed out at the dragon throat. The huge reptile jerked upwards and began to gain altitude. Eleven other dragons were behind it, joining it now.

With seeming slowness, the dragons began to beat relentlessly towards the reaver fleet as the crewmen prayed to their own Gods for a miracle.

They were doomed. There was no escaping the fact. Every reaver ship was doomed and the raid had been fruitless.

Elric could see the despair in the faces of the men as the masts of the reaver ships continued to bend under the strain of the shrieking witch-wind. They could do nothing, now, but die . . .

Elric fought to rid his mind of the swirling uncertainty which filled it. He drew his sword and felt the pulsating, evil

power which lurked in rune-carved *Stormbringer*. But he hated that power now—for it had caused him to kill the only human he had cherished. He realised how much of his strength he owed to the black-iron sword of his fathers and how weak he might be without it. He was an albino and that meant that he lacked the vitality of a normal human being. Savagely, futilely, as the mist in his mind was replaced by red fear, he cursed the pretensions of revenge he had held, cursed the day when he had agreed to lead the raid on Imrryr and most of all he bitterly vilified dead Yyrkoon and his twisted envy which had been the cause of the whole doom-ridden course of events.

But it was too late, now, for curses of any kind. The loud slapping of beating dragon wings filled the air and the monsters loomed over the fleeing reaver craft. He had to make some kind of decision—though he had no love for life, he refused to die by the hands of his own people. When he died, he promised himself, it would be by his own hand. He made his decision, hating himself.

He called off the witch-wind as the dragon venom seared down and struck the last ship in line.

He put all his powers into sending a stronger wind into the sails of his own boat while his bewildered comrades in the suddenly becalmed ships called over the water, enquiring desperately the reason for his act. Elric's ship was moving fast, now, and might just escape the dragons. He hoped so.

He deserted the man who had trusted him, Count Smiorgan, and watched as venom poured from the sky and engulfed him in blazing green and scarlet flame. Elric fled, keeping his mind from thoughts of the future, and sobbed aloud, that proud prince of ruins; and he cursed the malevolent Gods for the black day when idly, for their amusement, they had spawned men.

Behind him, the last reaver ships flared into sudden appalling brightness and, although half-thankful that they had escaped the fate of their comrades, the crew looked at Elric accusingly. He sobbed on, not heeding them, great griefs racking his soul.

A night later, off the coast of an island called Pan Tang, when the ship was safe from the dreadful recriminations of the Dragon Masters and their beasts, Elric stood brooding in the stern while the men eyed him with fear and hatred,

muttering of betrayal and heartless cowardice. They appeared to have forgotten their own fear and subsequent safety.

Elric brooded, and he held the black runesword in his two hands. *Stormbringer* was more than an ordinary battle-blade, this he had known for years, but now he realised that it was possessed of more sentience than he had imagined. The frightful thing had used its wielder and had made Elric destroy Cymoril. Yet he was horribly dependant upon it; he realised this with soul-rending certainty. He was an albino—a type rare among animals and rarer still among men. He was an albino, owning no natural reserves of vitality. Normally, he would be slothful, his reactions sluggish, his mind hazed. His eyesight would grow steadily worse as he grew older and he would probably die prematurely. His life would be dependent upon the grace of others; he knew this—he would become this if he lost the runesword's alien aid. But he feared and resented the sword's power—hated it bitterly for the chaos it had wrought in his brain and spirit. In an agony of uncertainty he held the blade in his hands and forced himself to weigh the factors involved. Without the sinister sword, he would lose pride—perhaps even life—but he might know the soothing tranquility of pure rest; with it he would have power and strength—but the sword would guide him on to evil paths and into a doom-racked future. He would savour power—but never peace. Never calm, sad peacefulness.

He drew a great, sobbing breath and, blind misgiving influencing him, threw the sword into the moon-drenched sea.

Incredibly, it did not sink. It did not even float on the water. It fell point forwards into the sea and *stuck* there, quivering as if it were imbedded in timber. It remained throbbing in the water, six inches of its blade immersed, and began to give off a weird devil-scream—a howl of horrible malevolence.

With a choking curse erupting from his throat, Elric stretched out his slim, whitely gleaming hand, trying to recover the sentient hellblade. He stretched further, leaning far out over the rail. He could not grasp it—it lay some feet from him, still. Gasping, a sickening sense of defeat overwhelming him, he dropped over the side and plunged into

the bone-chilling water, striking out with strained, grotesque strokes, towards the hovering sword. He was beaten—the sword had won.

He reached it and put his fingers around the hilt. At once it settled in his hand and Elric felt strength seep slowly back into his aching body. Then he realised that he and the sword were interdependant, for though he needed the blade, *Stormbringer*, parasitic, required a user—without a man to wield it, the blade was also powerless.

"We must be bound to one another, then," Elric murmured despairingly. "Bound by hell-forged chains and fate-haunted circumstance. Well, then—let it be thus so—and men will have cause to tremble and flee when they hear the names of Elric of Melniboné and *Stormbringer*, his sword. We are two of a kind—produced by an age which has deserted us. Let us give this age *cause* to hate us as we wander its young lands and new-formed seas!"

Strong again, Elric sheathed *Stormbringer* and the sword settled against his side; then, with powerful strokes, he began to swim towards the island while the men he left on the ship breathed with relief and speculated whether he would live or perish in the bleak waters of that strange and nameless sea . . .

—Michael Moorcock

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*Island superstition may be something white
people can laugh at but it can be a very real
and tangible thing to the native.*

BLOOD OFFERING

BY JOHN KIPPAX

Though the store on Kanui was still known as Samson's, Tod Baines from Sydney had been the owner for just over six months. He was a big, barrel-chested man, with a voice to match. His face was round, with a short red and grey beard and bushy red eyebrows, with a scrub of hair of the same colour. His eyes were a pale, icy blue, the eyes of a man to whom you paid cash.

Baines was forty-three now; he figured that if he was smart, he would be able to retire at sixty, not at a shaky seventy-two, like the previous owner. Still, good luck to old Samson, back in Auckland. And, more important, good luck to Tod Baines.

Kanui was the centre of the island group, and men used to paddle a three-day journey to buy from their nearest and only store. Baines intended to be fair, and to make money, and to see that no one pulled a fast one on him. That wasn't likely; Baines was that rarest of all kinds of sailors—the one who saved his money.

This morning he leaned against the central post of the veranda of the long, palm-thatched store. Outside, in the strong sunlight, the people of the village of Kanui walked and

chattered and haggled the length of the white coral road which ran by the shore and up to the jetty. They were mostly local people, brown and thick haired and smiling, though here and there a darker skin and a fiercer face told of a traveller from far away.

Baines glanced from the few stalls along to the jetty. Here, a crowd of canoes and catamarans bobbed around Montez' square old schooner, just off for Papeete. Beyond that where the cliffs swept upward from the creaming line of the shore, all lush with flower-splashed green, lay the swift canoes of the shark catchers, an important group of men on the island ; chief among these was the great Melanesian, Joey Ha, who tried to court Tahine, Baines' cook, and didn't make much headway.

Baines stretched. Yes, he'd come ashore at last, and in the right place. Let them call his store Samson's, as long as they wanted. He knew where the money was going, and that was what mattered. He had the lot—the store, the house, the pig compound, the plantations, and Lee Sang. Come to that, he had Tahine too, madly beautiful as many of the island girls were, but he didn't include her in his boasting to himself. His mind touched upon her, and left her for more important things. After all, cooks were easily found, but men like Lee Sang were not. The Chinese might be aloof and superior in his manner, might pretend that he did not care about Joey Ha coming round to see Tahine, but he was a treasure. His accounting was perfect, he could push goods without seeming to push them. No, Lee Sang was indispensable. Besides, there was the little matter of a deal in pearls, Sulu way. Lee Sang, not then in Samson's employ, had been the go-between. His lips were sealed but, all the same, Baines did not push him too far.

Baines, smoking and thinking about his next order to the wholesalers, did not at once notice the fantastic old creature who was trying to get up the three steps from the glaring, noisy road to the shade of the veranda. He stared at her as she accomplished this, and then stood for a moment, panting. One could never tell how old some of these island women were ; often they were hags at thirty. But this one, clad from throat to ankle in brown cloth, must have been a great deal older than that. Her brown face was a mass of seams and wrinkles ; her nose was flat, with wide crumpled nostrils,

and her mouth was no more than a gaping scar. From two pits winked, with quiescent menace, the blackest little pair of eyes that Baines had ever seen.

He knew her ; he had expected Mama Noi to call, sooner or later.

He watched her go in, and then pitched away the end of his cigarette and followed her. The customer is always right, he told himself, ironically.

Inside the store it was sombre and cool and good smelling. Lee Sang was serving three men with rope when the old woman shuffled up. At the sound of her approach, one of the men, a squat handsome fellow wearing old blue dungarees and a flower in his hair, turned to see.

He gasped, and at once backed away. The others saw him, and did the same. They were like kids caught stealing candy.

When Lee Sang saw her, he straightened. Without taking his eyes off her, he put down the rope, and then buttoned up half the jacket of his khaki drill tunic.

Baines leaned his hairy arms on the counter, watching. The laughter and noise of the people outside seemed to emphasise the tension within.

She raised a skinny hand in greeting.

Lee Sang shook his head.

"There is nothing," he said. Here, it seemed, he felt that he might safely hint at his contempt for all the island race.

"Nothing?" she croaked. For a fraction of a second she had turned to look at the three men at the far end of the counter, and they took another shuffle to the rear.

She protested.

"Samson gave."

"Samson is gone." Lee Sang's voice was flat and cold.

"You knew he was gone."

She turned to look at Baines, and then at the three men, who shrank nervously under her gaze. . .

Lee Sang now seemed irritated.

"There is no more tribute, Mama Noi."

Lee Sang and Mama Noi clashed eyes for a few seconds.

Baines strolled up, carefully.

"What's this about?"

Her little coal eyes darted.

"You know, Baines. The people give me tribute, for what I do for them. Samson gave, too."

Baines thought, she thinks she is a queen, here. How far will she explain herself?

"What do you do for them?"

He thought, there are tales enough; what's her version?

"I look after the shark catchers." She gestured at the three men, who flinched. "I bring them good, plenty sharks. All sharks are mine—and the shark god's. Men catch sharks, make money, buy from you."

"I don't catch sharks, Mama Noi. Why should I give you anything?"

"Samson gave."

She was stubborn.

Lee Sang made a hiss of impatience.

There was no change of expression upon the old woman's repulsive face.

"What did Samson give her, Lee Sang?"

Lee Sang's answer was stiff.

"This old woman was given a hundred cigarettes, half a pound of chewing tobacco, and four tins of bully every month."

Baines was deriving a certain amount of amusement from this. He contracted his shaggy red brows and tried to look fierce.

"Well! That's where his profit went, I guess!" He decided to be reasonable and economical. "Get me a twenty pack of cigarettes off there."

Lee Sang passed them over. Baines thrust them at the old witch.

"Here. Compliments of the bossman. And don't come asking again."

For a moment she looked steadily at her benefactor. Then she extended a claw, and took the pack. She turned slowly, surveying Lee Sang, and the three uneasy customers, and then she shuffled out, muttering a word which might have been of thanks, though Baines doubted it.

The three islanders watched her go, and then descended upon Baines with excited chatter.

"Mister Baines, that's a bad thing!"

"She's a witch!"

"That's right. She call up the shark god!"

"She'll be angry. She'll call him up!"

"No Mama Noi, no sharks!"

Baines sorted out the remarks which interested him most. Without ever wanting to decry the way of life which his customers led, he did get some little amusement at pinning them down in their beliefs and watching them wriggle.

"She'll call up what?"

The man addressed twisted his hands one over the other.

"She can call up the shark god from the sea!"

"Yes. He is all black, with the head of a shark and the body of a man!"

"And he kills!"

Baines grinned.

"Seen it, then?"

They were not so quick answering that. They shuffled, and avoided his eyes.

"Well, Moky?"

"But she can," protested another. "My father says she can."

Baines grunted.

"Huh. Reckon he's been in Ti's when the beer's off and the coconut liquor's on." He knew that was as far as he ought to joke about it. "All right." He dismissed the subject. "I'll think about Mama Noi. You boys got what you want?"

"Sure, thanks Mister Baines."

Lee Sang watched them leave. He shook his head.

"Tcha! Like children. What will they believe next?"

Baines gave him a cigarette and took one himself.

"Your trouble is, you just plain don't like 'em. Sometimes, I think they know it."

Lee Sang looked levelly back through the curling smoke.

"No, I don't. I prefer civilised people."

"Like you and me?"

Lee Sang shrugged.

"You want to go back to Sydney. I want to go back to Singapore."

Baines had wide interests on Kanui; there was work to be done on his plantations, and good public relations was part of his policy. Lee Sang was only interested in the store, using it as a refuge as well as a place of work. The arrangement suited Baines; at the back of his mind there was always the idea that the Chinese had to be kept in his place. Lucky that, for the most part, Lee Sang seemed to know his place.

One day Baines found in his store three men from Aota, the smaller village on the other side of the island. Two were brown, but the third was the magnificent Joey Ha, big chested and as black as midnight. Baines hadn't seen him for some time, and he wondered if now, maybe, the big shark catcher and Tahine were past the shy-glance-and-hold-hands stage.

As he entered he heard them laughing, and he thought instantly that Lee Sang, who already disliked Joey Ha, would dislike the laughter even more.

Sure enough, Lee Sang was looking his disapproval, with his face tighter and blanker than ever.

"Ho, Baines!" called Joey Ha. He had flowers in his hair and his white teeth shone. Baines thought, Tahine must feel honoured, to have this man after her. "Ho Baines, this feller—" and then Joey Ha doubled up with laughter.

"What's on?" asked Baines.

Joey tried again.

"This feller—this feller Lee Sang—he try to sell us shark hooks!"

"Shark hooks!" cackled a second.

"Iron shark hooks!" hooted the third, a short brown man in a green loincloth.

They swayed and rolled and yelled and split themselves with laughter.

Joey Ha turned to see Lee Sang's set face and broke into a fresh bellow.

"Now!" he giggled, "now this feller say we use *his* magic!"

Baines scratched his beard and watched the scene with a tolerant grin while they paid and left, still chuckling.

He went to the door, and watched them down the road.

Lee Sang came and joined him.

"Mister Baines, why am I wrong?"

Baines knew that Lee Sang had been deeply hurt. The store-owner translated that in his mind as 'What can I do to get even with those men?'

Baines said, "How did we come to have shark hooks in store?"

"The last order. I sent for them. I saw them in the catalogue, and I thought—"

"No. No dice, Lee Sang."

"But why not? This is a shark catching island."

"You won't sell them any shark hooks. There is no magic in them. Everybody knows that you have to have magic to catch sharks. They grow their own hooks."

Lee Sang scowled.

"They laughed at me."

"Forget it." Baines deposited his bulk into a rickety cane chair. "They take the growing branches of the ironwood trees, and then they tie them back in the shape of a hook. They say a prayer, and maybe they pay Mama Noi for a spell. They come and see how the hooks are growing, and then they have another prayer, and some more magic. When the hook is ready, they cut it and trim it and give it a bit more magic, and there you are. They're certain to catch sharks with it, after all that performance. You ask 'em."

Lee Sang moved restlessly along the veranda. He had been laughed at.

"Mama Noi—" he began, and then stopped. "You don't believe all this, Mister Baines?"

"Uhuh," said Baines. "What matters is that they believe it."

Lee Sang turned to go into the store.

"That Joey Ha!" His voice was almost a growl. "How he laughed."

The Chinese went to the bins, and started to slam the hooks into them.

"Leave 'em in one piece," called Baines. "They'll get used, if only for marlin or something."

A few weeks later, Baines noticed a falling off in custom. When he served, he was used to talking to his clients in dialect or pidgin, of making an occasion of the simplest sale, in the manner of the islanders. But now, there was no social atmosphere. They simply took what they wanted, paid, and went. One day he served all alone in the store while Lee Sang went fishing, taking one of his rare days off. A dozen men had made the long journey from Kau, and Baines was pleased to see them, as they usually stocked up. But this time, flour and sugar and bully was all they took, and they hardly said a word.

And what made Baines mad, was that they avoided his eye. But he tried to sound pleasant.

"What's the matter, Tammy? Not got much to say for yourself, this time?"

Tammy small and handsome, fiddled with the flower in his hair and looked at the floor.

"Nothing."

"Got all you want?"

"Yeah."

Baines breathed out deeply.

"'Cept—"

"What?"

"You—you got some good shark hooks?"

Baines stared at the islander.

"Sure," he said slowly, "try these."

He went to the bin and got them out. Tammy and his companions handled them disdainfully. Baines watched, baffled. They bought some shark hooks. When Baines put the odd one back into the bin he saw that it was only half full. So, Lee Sang had sold some already. He didn't get it, what with trade falling off and now this trade in shark hooks. As far as he knew, the men from Kau used to get their hooks from the Kanui hunters, as no ironwood trees grew on Kau.

At six Baines shut the store and went for a walk through the village. People were strolling and chatting, brown kids played on the beach below the road. Palms patterned the sky. From far out, the breakers thundered on the reef.

Baines strolled along, sometimes too deep in thought to acknowledge an occasional greeting. Shark hooks, and the sudden drop in trade. Was there a connection? Had they been up to their tricks with their shark god, or listening to Mama Noi? Had she put an embargo on him? The idea of retirement to Sydney by the time he was sixty, or earlier, was firm in his mind, and anything which stood in the way of its realisation was slated for trouble.

He was passing Ti's, the drink shop, when a commotion from within made him stop; one or two loafers near the door were taking an interest in the angry voices.

"Low damn Chinaman!" howled someone, and Baines took a step towards the place; the Chinese population of Kanui was one, and his name was Lee Sang. A second later the door whanged open, and out shot the skinny figure of Baines' assistant, closely followed by Joey Ha, black and irate. The Melanesian's eyes rolled white and savage in his raging face, and in his right hand he gripped a large machete, which he swished in the air as he skidded after the flying Chinese.

"You wait !" he hollered. "You wait along me catch this feller !"

The population stared agog.

Baines, seeing that murder was about to be done in the main street, addressed the pair in a voice which pained all ears within thirty yards.

"Joey Ha—STOP !" he bawled.

Baines had no official position on the island, but he was white, and he was the sort to be obeyed.

And Joey Ha hesitated.

With a similar roar, Baines halted Lee Sang. He hurried to where the huge black man stood, with his chest heaving. A crowd gathered, jabbering and pointing and explaining.

"What goes on ?" demanded Baines, not greatly reducing the volume of his intimidating voice. "What the hell are you playing at ?"

Joey did not immediately reply. He glanced over at where Lee Sang stood, also with a small knot of people round him.

"Lee Sang, come here !" barked Baines. He turned to Joey when he saw that Lee Sang, after some hesitation, was obeying. "If you can't keep the peace, Joey Ha, there are ways—"

Joey exploded.

"Peace ! Me like fine keep peace ! You tell this Lee Sang keep peace ! My word, this criminal feller !"

Lee Sang was at Baines' side. Now, with his master to protect him, something of his superior attitude had returned.

"Mister Baines, I don't know what this man is talking about—"

The crowd listened, and growled, and that upset Baines, because they were the best natured folk in the world, in the ordinary way.

"—I was having a drink," continued Lee Sang, "and this man came up and started to insult me. I did not understand all he said. He accused me of certain things, and then he became offensive, and violent. The rest you saw."

Baines addressed the simmering Melanesian.

"What is wrong ?"

Joey knew the white man's idea of justice. He spoke sullenly

"Not prove."

"Go on. Tell me."

Joey glared at Lee Sang, wriggled his toes, and thumbed the blade of his machete.

"Well?" Baines knew that Joey would not say. Instead, the big black was liable to nurse his grievance and let it boil up again, later.

"Not prove."

Baines knew that it was no good pressing the matter, and it was equally useless to ask the crowd. They would take their cue from Joey Ha.

"All right, you feller Joey. You think before you hit, next time. Lee Sang, get back to the store."

Joey watched the Chinese go, as the crowd began to drift away.

"Sure," he muttered, "I think, next time."

At home Baines tried to get the truth from Lee Sang, but got nothing. The Chinese insisted that he didn't know what Joey Ha was talking about. Baines turned in that night with the thought of ruination in his mind. If his trade continued to go down . . .

He got to sleep somewhere around midnight. Not long after, he was roused by the eruption of a great row from the direction of the piggery. Swearing, he turned up the lamp and found a torch; pigs squealed and bellowed, there was the sound of wood being smashed, and then came a terrifying scream which, though certainly from a pig, had yet an eerie human quality. The squealing and ki-hi-ing went on as Baines ran down the path, gripping a pistol, but it had stopped by the time he got to the smashed fence.

Lee Sang was there, shivering. He could hardly speak.

"L-look, over there!"

The light of the torch showed a ghastly sight. A half grown pig lay on its side, almost covered in blood. It was panting fast, and it bubbled at the mouth. On its back was a great semicircular gash, right down to the vertebrae, as though some incredible mouth had taken one awful bite from the living creature.

Baines stepped over and put a bullet through the pig's head.

"The shark bite," said Lee Sang.

"What?" Baines swung on his quivering assistant.

"Joey Ha believes in the shark god," said Lee Sang.

"Joey Ha didn't do that," replied Baines, sharply.

"What—what did, Mister Baines?" Lee Sang pointed to the red and sticky corpse. "That's a shark bite!"

It occurred to Baines that Lee Sang might have said a lot more after being chased by Joey.

"Let's nail this fence up again," said Baines, "and then we'll go back to bed."

While Lee Sang fetched nails and a hammer, Baines dragged the carcass out, and then took a look round the compound. There were no more holes; the rest of the pigs were safe. Baines figured that he would have a visitor next day.

Next morning, Lee Sang was down at the copra sheds when she came. Baines could not prevent himself from stiffening when he saw the old woman shuffle across to the counter. She stared at him all the time from her entrance.

Baines stared right back and folded his thick arms across his chest. Red hair thrust from the top of his singlet.

"Well, Mama Noi?"

She just looked at him. God knows what power she really has, thought Baines, but kowtowing won't do any good. He came round the corner, pushed a stool to her, and gave her a cigarette.

He spoke lightly.

"If you'd said you'd like some pork, maybe I could have given you some, next killing."

"We must talk, Baines." The little black eyes flashed. "The shark god is offended. He may demand sacrifice."

"I figured somebody was offended," returned Baines.

"That was his sacrifice he got last night, eh?"

"Did your servant see the dead pig?"

"He did."

"Does he know how it died?"

Baines was diplomatic.

"He has his ideas, and I've got mine."

"He has offended the shark god. He must be punished."

"How?" Baines spilled smoke, and eyed her through it.

"Because he is the man. He was determined that the hunters should buy shark hooks, so he went to all the iron-wood trees, where the young branches had been bent and tied, and he cut them all away."

So *that* was it! Baines felt dizzy for a moment, so strong was the conflict of emotions inside him. Lee Sang, contemp-

tuous and angry, had taken his peculiar revenge. Pleasant thoughts of throttling the Chinese rose in Baines' mind. But, dominant in his mind was the knowledge that his livelihood on the island was now in the hands of Mama Noi.

He was cautious.

"But, surely, wouldn't the shark god be pleased that these ironwood hooks, so full of magic, are not to be used to catch his—his people?"

She cackled.

"No. Because the hooks you sell are really better."

Baines was in deep water.

"But," she warned, "the shark men will not know this."

Baines nodded, and scratched his beard. Softly, he thought, go softly.

"No shark hunter would believe that my hooks are better, anyhow." With the idea of placation in his mind, he handed her a slab of chocolate. She took it without a word. My trade, he thought, my trade : damn Lee Sang.

"All right, Mama Noi. I will give you a few things that you need. Maybe, if this thing comes out right, I could let you have something regularly. And I will speak to my servant. I will *impress* the seriousness of his offence upon him."

But she snapped, "He must be punished."

Baines saw himself doing without Lee Sang.

"How will he be punished?"

"He will be visited—by one sent by the shark god."

"To do what?"

"I cannot say. The shark god will instruct. If the one sent fails, the shark god will exact a penalty."

Baines almost let himself say 'By God, you really believe this, don't you?'—but he checked in time. That would never do.

"Listen, Mama Noi. You go out to the point, and speak to the shark god for me. If the shark god is wise he will understand that men sometimes do vain and silly things. Tell him that I apologise for Lee Sang, and that in justice, I would like to have the man frightened. Then, if I give you something every month, surely that will be enough." He came close to her, gazing earnestly into the wrecked old face. "You can tell him that, Mama Noi. The one he sends on the mission will obey him, eh?"

"To disobey is *death*." The last word was a snake-like hiss. "If the one sent does not obey, he must go and submit himself to the will of the god."

Baines nearly gave a mock shiver ; despite his anger, he saw the funny side of this. But he kept a straight face.

"Will you tell the god, Mama Noi?"

Her look was flinty.

"I will tell him of you, Baines, and what you wish."

Then she hobbled away ; an incoming customer popped his eyes and made way for her.

When Lee Sang came in he got the full blast of Baines' temper ; people on the road outside came on to the veranda to listen, even though the proprietor of Samson's was perfectly audible half way up the jetty. Baines went to the limit of verbal castigation always remembering the little affair of the pearls. Then he simmered down somewhat.

"Such a damn fool thing, Lee Sang. Why can't you ignore their laughter?"

Lee Sang, still a little shaken from Baines' explosive condemnation of his trickery, still tried to defend himself.

"That Joey Ha—"

"Forget Joey Ha. Just get wise to what may happen. Now, listen. We've got to satisfy the old girl. Let her think she's come out on top. That's all there is to it. I'm not so certain she's not come out on top, at that." Ironically Baines asked, "Think you can manage to seem scared?"

Lee Sang's face was very tight-looking.

"What—will she do?"

"Aha. So you think that there might be something in the story of the shark god, after all?"

"No!"

"All right. The way I figure it, is this : cut out all the fancy stuff, and it boils down to the fact that she wants to give you a fright. No more. You take a good sized fright, and that's all there can be to it. We get our trade back. You can put a camp bed in my room until this surprise packet turns up. We'll trip wire the place all around, and I'll have a pistol under my pillow. Okay?"

"I am not afraid, Mister Daines."

"Maybe not ; but do as I say, and we'll clear this up without anyone getting hurt."

The nights passed, one, two, three, four. Lee Sang, for all his pretended indifference, was beginning to show signs of strain, and there were times when Baines didn't feel any too happy either.

On the fifth night, it happened. All that day the rain clouds had hung low over the island and the sea, and the night promised to be more than usually oppressive. They read until midnight, when the lamp was turned down and they tried to sleep.

Baines woke at about four a.m.

Though the rain was drumming down steadily, he knew that it was not the cause of his awakening. He turned his head slightly, to look over at Lee Sang's bed, in the dim light, and he almost shouted with alarm.

Someone, or some *thing*, was standing over the bed of the sleeping Chinese.

Baines noticed that the room was filled with a rotten, acrid stench.

The figure had the body of a man, black and shining, but the head, though turned away from him, could be seen to be terrifyingly—*different*. It was longish, pointed at the top, coming from the shoulders without any thinning for a neck . . .

Noiselessly, Baines slid a hand under his pillow, and cocked the pistol before he withdrew it. The creature bent forward, as though it were seeking to take a bite out of Lee Sang's throat . . .

Baines knew, even as he fired, that his aim was not steady. The explosion, thick and deafening in that small space, chimed in with a fearful scream from Lee Sang. The creature leaped and spun, giving Baines a glimpse of a terrifying face the principle feature of which was a great slash of a mouth, and then it jumped right through the window space. Baines leaped from his bed, ignoring the gibbering Lee Sang, grabbed a torch and tore after the creature. He knew that, unless it could fly, there was only one way it could go until it hit the road outside, and he had a conviction that he knew the direction it might take when it reached the road.

He blundered out ; the rain had stopped. Here and there, lights came on as people were rousing from the sound of the shot, and he heard voices. His torch showed him a splotch of blood on the road, and then another, along the jetty. So he had winged him ! He trailed the intruder, past where

canoes were clustered round a small schooner. Someone shone a light and hailed him, but he did not reply.

At the end of the jetty were the steps, with the wooden rail. More splashes of blood. Baines hesitated. He could be waiting for me down there . . . but he went down silently, his torch seeking ahead.

As he shone his torch into the darkness, where the faint blue of the sea light was cut by dark piles and cross beams, he experienced a chill of fear as he smelt that stench again. He was not far from the end of the jetty ; the sea washed and curled and frothed about, while from beyond came the thunder from the reef.

Baines heard people calling, distantly, but he paid no attention. He only had eyes for the dark figure which sat crouched upon a beam. The light showed a black hand clutched to a shining shoulder and through the fingers of the hand dripped and trickled a thin stream of blood. The shark headpiece was still in place.

"Joey !" called Baines. "Joey Ha !"

The figure gave no sign that he had heard. Though Baines could see how the toes gripped the beam, there was something deathlike in the quality of its immobility, as though its fate was already sealed, as though the shark figure were waiting for a pre-ordained end.

"Joey !"

No answer.

Someone was running along the jetty.

Baines was about to venture along to the joint of the beam upon which the figure sat, when a faint change in the surface of the sea attracted his attention. A thin line of phosphorescence was weaving in towards the jetty.

A shark !

If the one sent fails, the shark god will exact a penalty !

He remembered Mama Noi's words.

Now the great fish swam right under the jetty ; its fin cleaved the water ten feet from where Baines stood.

He cursed silently, why hadn't he shot at it ?

The figure on the beam gave a low moan. It rocked backwards and forwards.

From above, someone shouted.

"Baines, where the hell are you ?"

The shark was turning to come in again. This time, he thought, this time I'll get it !

But, just before it reached the jetty, the figure—it *must* have been Joey Ha, for he was never seen again—gave a low cry, and plunged into the dark sea. A second after the splash, the surface boiled briefly. With a shaking hand, Baines directed the light of his torch upon the water, where the subsiding foam showed pink and evil.

Baines gripped the rail, and was sick.

"Baines ! You down there ? Mister Baines !"

"Yeah. I'm here."

As he slowly climbed the stairway, he was thinking of the tribute which he ought to pay Mama Noi.

—John Kippax

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VALLEY OF THE RAINBIRDS

BY W. T. WEBB

The rain and the starlings descended upon the valley together. Margot watched the water glide over the glass of the conservatory and derange the clean, wintry lines of the orchard into wavering vagueness. Margot liked things bright and well-defined, like emblems on a coat of arms.

Stamping a foot with exasperation, she flung aside her palette and turned her back upon the easel with its half-painted canvas. Moodily, with fists pushed into the pockets of her smock, she went close to the conservatory door and peered through the moss-smelling glass.

The garden, the orchard, the whole valley, were soggy with rain. In the nearest apple tree, where she placed fat for the bluetits and fingers of bread for the sparrows, a murmur of starlings perched riotously. They yelled and jostled each other like half-tipsy louts on a merry-go-round.

More were joining them every moment. The heavens loured with starlings and rain. It was like a sky stuffed with lightning and thunder. Any moment now, the real storm would break.

Margot shuddered. The drab, graceless birds in the drenched tree, seen through the rain-bloated glass, looked like huge lice. How different from the dainty bluetits she loved to watch !

Some lines from Rimbaud, translated by Norman Cameron, came into her mind :

*"Huge serpents, vermin-plagued, drop down into the mire
With black affluvium from the contorted trees."*

Her familiar trees were contorted by the oily film of rain sliding past the glass. Below the trees the ground was already as slimy as a river bed. The opposite slope of the valley was covered in brambles and grass which looked like brown algae in the rain.

For a moment she glanced sideways towards her own reflection in the conservatory wall. She saw a slender wraith of a woman in a paint-daubed smock. Black hair formed a blunted triangle about a white face. The only visible features were a pair of skull-like eye sockets.

She turned again and looked into the garden.

Of late she had often seen the starlings in the distance. Watching them in their thousands as they flocked across the sky like a purposeful cloud, she had wondered what would happen if such a multitude ever landed in her valley. Surely they would eat up everything. They would land like a swarm of locusts. Like a swarm of locusts they would depart, leaving a desert behind them.

Now it was happening. The starlings had arrived in her valley. They had brought the rain with them. There they were—gibbering and brawling in her orchard trees. Surely something dreadful would happen now !

When the knock sounded at her door, Margot's first inclination was to ignore it. She had been alone since her arrival in the valley many years ago. Her loneliness had spawned within her the desire for more loneliness. A person was knocking at her door. But there was nothing she wanted to see anyone about—so why should she answer ? She was content with her valley, her painting, and her own company. Outside was the machine-and-headline world she wanted no part of. Her door was her barrier against the things she

hated and feared. If she opened it now—who knows what frightfulness might force its way inside?

But another look at the starlings and the rain persuaded her to leave the conservatory and go to the door. She would see who had knocked. She would talk with someone for a while. Perhaps when she'd finished talking the birds would have taken themselves off again.

It was gloomy in the inner rooms and passages of the old house. But it was much too early to light the lamps. Margot moved quietly to the front door. For a moment she paused behind it, listening to her own pulses and the scratching claws of the rain. Then, with sudden decisiveness, she jerked the door open.

The man who stood bareheaded under her spouting front porch had obviously arrived in a car. Looking over her box hedge she saw the rain splashing up from its battered roof. She lowered her eyes and examined her visitor. He was a starved-looking man with a wrinkled gourd of a face. His pale, rainwashed eyes watched her appealingly—almost fanatically.

"I've come about the rainbirds," he said with a wry smile. "Can I—can I step inside and explain?"

"The rainbirds? Well, yes—come inside if you want to!"

Feeling strangely excited, she sat him down in her cluttered little parlour. She left him alone there while she went into the kitchen to make a pot of tea.

"Sorry I've no fire," she said, looking at his wet, raw-looking hands. "I'm in the conservatory most of the day. I've got a stove out there." She set tea and biscuits on the table.

Rainwater trickled into the empty fireplace. She thought she heard the starlings crowding her chimney pot.

"Peabody's the name," the man said diffidently. "I saw the rainbirds come into the valley. Thought I'd like to take a look at them before they fly away again."

"They're starlings aren't they?" she asked idly as she poured the tea.

Peabody nodded his untidy head. "*Mostly* starlings."

"You called them rainbirds."

He smiled somewhat absently.

"Rainbirds. That's right. Haven't you noticed? Wherever they go they carry the rain with them. Of course, it's not

accidental—although not many people will believe that. Remarkable really, how long it takes people to realise what is taking place right in front of their eyes !”

“ You mean the starlings actually *cause* the rain ?”

“ Exactly ! The starlings and—the others.”

She found herself almost enjoying this conversation. Mr. Peabody had such a lack of self-assertion that his presence did not seem to disrupt her solitude.

“ But how do they do it ?”

Peabody lifted a biscuit to his mouth.

“ The starlings like the rain. It softens the ground and lets them get at grubs, worms, and insects. It also acts as a cover for them—a sort of rainscreen.”

He smiled and bit off half the biscuit

“ But how on earth do they do it ?”

He shrugged, munching noisily.

“ Search me ! There’s so many of them, you see. Maybe each of them carries a little rain around with it. Maybe they manufacture it as they fly.”

Margot realised she was gaping at him. She closed her mouth quickly.

“ How is rain caused, anyway ?” Peabody went on. “ For years now, scientists have tried to control the rain. They haven’t had much success. Who knows that these birds, in their incredibly vast flocks have not beaten the scientists to it ?”

Margot pictured the birds in her soggy orchard. She shuddered.

“ They go in such big flocks these days. I suppose a mass of birds flying together must effect the air conditions in some way.”

She looked round at the pictures crowding the walls of her parlour with the air of one who had not noticed them before. Most of them were sunlit landscapes painted by herself.

Looking at them now, as though with Peabody’s eyes, she fancied them a little trivial and tawdry. His voice brought her attention back to the subject under discussion.

“ Of course it does ! And the starlings, at least their leaders, are well aware of that.”

“ I don’t recall seeing them as a girl—not in the large flocks we get these days.”

"No!" Peabody nodded with the intense seriousness she had come to recognise as his natural manner. "Twenty or thirty years ago you never saw flocks of starlings anything like so big as we see them today. But things have changed a lot in the past thirty years."

"Have they?" Margot felt a little worried, mainly because she did not want things to have changed. She preferred them as they were in her childhood. Happy days! When the man-in-the-moon was just a nursery joke and atoms had not been invented. Alone here in her valley she could believe that things were as they always had been. If you did not refer to the awful changes it was almost as though they had not happened. She began to regret she'd opened her door to this lank-haired stranger.

"Lots of birds have been killed off with the advance of civilisation," he was saying. "Hawks, kestrels, harriers, and many others that kept the numbers of the smaller species in check. Other natural enemies, like rats and foxes, have been reduced. Many other birds, too, have died off—poisoned by chemical insecticides and fertilisers. Wrens, robins, wagtails, thrushes . . . in fact practically every family but the Sturnidae—the starlings."

"Why is that? Why should the starlings be immune?"

She saw his eyes on her, pleadingly, as though he was really trying to say something quite different.

"Because—although no one has yet woken up to the fact—the starlings have changed with the changing conditions."

"How?" she asked, but too quietly for him to hear.

"No one has yet realised," he said without pausing for breath, "that the starlings might well rule the world one day. Yes, I mean just that—rule the world! Scientists have said that the rats will take over if humanity ever succeeds in destroying itself. But I'd put my money on the starlings any day. They're more mobile; and they've got a better organisation!"

She smiled at this, but immediately tried to hide the smile behind her teacup. It was obviously Mr. Peabody's obsession. Everyone was entitled to an obsession these days. Religion, Politics, Business. If only you could find something to be obsessed with you could perhaps be happy once in a while. It took your mind away from the mindless robot called Progress, that was irrevocably grinding against life.

Her own obsession was with art. How could she begrudge Mr. Peabody his obsession with the starlings? Perhaps if she humoured him a while he would go away, and leave her to get on with her painting.

"There's a flock of starlings in the valley here," he reminded her. "Have you taken a good look at them?"

"Yes, they're horrid. Not the individual starling—I don't mean that. By itself a starling's quite a pretty bird. It's only in the mass that they become repulsive."

"But have you noticed them in the mass?" Peabody insisted like a patient schoolmaster. "Really taken notice?"

"I've seen them swarming across the sky like a huge flying carpet," she began. But he cut her short.

"No: I mean, have you noticed certain individuals within the flock?"

She shook her head. There must have been a million birds in some of the flocks she'd seen. How could he expect her to notice individuals?

"I've studied them for some time," he said, brushing a crumb or two from his chin. She watched his Adam's apple move as he emptied his teacup. Then he went on to say that some members of the huge flocks were bigger than the others—and strangely different. "They've got coloured stripes on their wings and bodies. Stripes of red, green and yellow. These stripes are more like military insignia than the normal plumage markings of a bird. Their heads, too, are different. It's almost as though they're wearing metal helmets."

Margot raised her cup so quickly that some of the tea swilled out and ran warmly over her chin.

Controlling a wild desire to scream with laughter, she dabbed a handkerchief on her face. "Perhaps they're not really starlings at all," she said at length.

Peabody hastened to agree with her. Then added seriously: "They may not even be birds!"

Margot looked at him almost angrily. Her struggle to control her laughter had been so successful that she no longer even felt an inclination to smile. It was all very well to have an obsession. But if you expected others to respect your obsession you had to keep within certain limits.

"But, Mr. Peabody!" she protested. "If they're not birds, what are they?"

He shrugged extravagantly. "Who knows? They could be some kind of mutant, in the way that the modern bird is a mutant archaeopteryx, which had teeth like a lizard and claws on its wings. The important point is that they're intelligent. Even ordinary birds are devilishly clever, you know—and these are superbirds."

Margot looked at him sadly.

He went on: "We tend to under-estimate the intelligence of the birds. They're fantastically intelligent really, but with an intelligence of a different order to ours. Take the homing-pigeon, for example, or the swallow . . ."

"Or the bluetit," Margo volunteered, knowing she was adding fuel to the bonfire of his crazy notions.

"By all means!" he said eagerly. "I've seen bluetits go through some amazing tests."

Tests! Couldn't they even leave the poor little bluetit alone?

"It's been established," he was saying, "that birds have a well-developed language. They have a social organisation much older than any of ours. Robins for example, are distributed over the countryside with an almost mathematical regularity . . ."

Oh dear! Margot thought wearily. Life's even duller than I imagined it!

". . . and these starlings, organised in flocks of hundreds of thousands, have an intelligence of an extremely high order."

"How can you be sure of that?"

Peabody jabbed a finger at his palm. "They can make rain, for one thing."

"But that may be just a coincidence," Margot protested. "Perhaps they hide away somewhere in dry weather and just come out when it rains." Her theory sounded plausible; but the expression on Peabody's face damped her feeling of mild triumph.

"No. I've followed this flock for weeks now. And it's rained wherever they've moved." He paused and Margot lowered her eyes from his intense gaze. "Rainfall is increasing every year. Do you realize that? And the flocks of starlings are multiplying. The rainbirds want us out of it. And they'll get us out of it, too, before long, if someone doesn't soon wake up to the peril we're in."

"I really don't see what can be done," Margot said, taking his cup and saucer. Peabody got to his feet but made no effort to approach the door.

"Would you mind if I went into your garden and did a few experiments?"

There was something appealingly pathetic about him. She thought of him writing to the newspapers and persistently lobbying public officials with his strange notions about the birds. She could imagine the treatment he would get.

"No, go ahead and do what you wish!" Perhaps if he disturbed the wretched birds they would go away from her valley—taking the rain with them. Tidying her smock, she accompanied him to the door and watched him go squelching out into the rain. A few minutes later he came back with a bulky box.

"I've got some nets and traps here, and a camera," he said with shy eagerness. "I'm hoping to capture one of the bigger creatures, or at least get a photograph of one. Up to now I've only managed to get the ordinary starlings, *Sturnus vulgaris*. The others have been too darn crafty. But once I get actual proof of their existence—at least I'll make a few ornithologists sit up and take notice."

She led him through the house to the conservatory. She gave a glance at her unfinished picture on the easel, and then looked at her guest, wondering if he would notice it. But he was far too obsessed with his own mission.

Outside in the garden the starlings were kicking up a shindy like a gale at sea. But apart from their numbers and their obvious excitement, there seemed to be nothing remarkable about them.

"How do you know these other birds exist?" Margot asked.

Peabody lowered his box to the conservatory flagstones and fished out a pair of binoculars. "Take a look for yourself! The superbirds take the lead when the flock's in flight."

Feeling slightly ridiculous, Margot accepted the binoculars and hung the leather strap on her neck. She made no attempt to look through the lenses.

Rain fell heavily. The far slope of the valley was hidden. The orchard was a writhing quagmire of birds. She opened the door for Peabody and watched him walk unsteadily down the garden path with his box. As he went forward the birds in front of him lurched into the air, flew in a half circle on either side like a dark bow-wave, and came to land somewhere among the masses of their fellows.

For a while she lost sight of him among the trees. Raising the glasses, she tried to focus them on the slope at the far side of the valley ; but all she saw was a watery haze as though she was squinting through a couple of peepholes into a murky aquarium. —

She lowered the binoculars and ran a fingernail over the milled rim of a lens adjuster. Peabody was still hidden from her but she could tell he was out there somewhere with the birds by the way their cries had changed in pitch and tempo. Some of the excitement they felt was transmitted to her, as though deep inside he understood certain words of their language.

They were enjoying themselves, wildly, rebelliously, like children at some saturnalian jamboree.

Gradually the birds' cries rose to a crescendo. Margot found herself dancing up and down in sympathy with them. Then the rain stopped. The sky cleared, and, miraculously the starlings rose like a dark snowstorm in reverse, like a great lid being lifted off the valley.

As the birds rose Margot felt a weight suddenly removed from her. A vital part of her was going up, up, with the great flock of birds. Joyfully she ran forward and stood near the first tree, where she always placed food for the bluetits and sparrows. She saw Peabody squinting into the bright sky. He looked strangely shabby and out of place in the sunlight, like a bleached gollywog that had lain in a dusty attic.

"Looks like I scared 'em off!" He raised his cracked voice above the sounds of the water runneling off the apple trees and seeping down into the soil. He had the camera out of its box now, and was adjusting a telescopic lens.

Then Margot felt her stomach turn over as another sound keened above the valley—the sound of a million wings descending in vengeful flight. Peabody's wrung-out face was upturned when the darkness of the birds descended.

Margot watched, trancelike, as the first birds homed on his head and shoulders. His brief screams were muffled by the fanning of wings. For a moment he stood on the orchard path like a tragically inadequate scarecrow—the figure of a man sculptured in vibrant feathers. Then his figure was no longer distinguishable among the pyramid of birds that filled the garden.

Soon the garden, the orchard, the whole valley, were covered by the dark, vital bodies of the birds. Rain once more began to fall.

The spiritual weight the Margot had felt lifted from her with the soaring of the birds, now seemed to be back with her, heavier than before. As she closed the door she saw one of the creatures looking in through the glass. It was bigger than the other birds; and bands of red, green and yellow ran vividly across its breast and coverts. It seemed to be wearing a metallic helmet which gleamed faintly in the watery light. For a moment or two it watched her expressionlessly. Then it darted away to the orchard, where a murmur of starlings were preening and chattering near something on the ground.

Margot suppressed a shudder and took up her palette once more. Her picture showed a view of the orchard, and she painted it not as it was now, but as she remembered it, with branches glowing with blossom, and with bluetits perching cleverly among the twigs.

—W. T. Webb

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STUDIES IN SCIENCE FICTION

Just over twenty-five years ago Stanley Weinbaum added a new dimension to science fiction, particularly in the realm of the interplanetary adventure story. It was a short but meteoric claim to distinction by this young writer already under the shadow of an early death.

11. Stanley G. Weinbaum

by Sam Moskowitz

In 1934 the great depression had produced a change in the reading habits of most Americans. Even though a great many men and women may have desired the temporary escape which science fiction provided, they frequently could not afford to purchase more than one or two monthly magazines.

In such an atmosphere, publishers of the three surviving science fiction magazines competed desperately for a diminishing pool of readers. Hugo Gernsback's *Wonder Stories* gave preference to stories with new ideas, and unusual approaches to the worlds of tomorrow. In this, it was joined in grim competition with *Astounding Stories*. This magazine, after a nine-month hiatus in 1933, had been purchased by Street and Smith, and it also featured new and startling ideas, labelling its most unorthodox stories, "Thought variants."

Though harried by financial difficulties, Hugo Gernsback humoured his teen-age editor, Charles D. Hornig, and took time out to read a short story which had just come in through the mail. Publisher and editor, displaying remarkable restraint along with their mutual enthusiasm, wrote in the blurb for *A Martian Odyssey* by unknown Stanley G. Weinbaum in the July, 1934 issue of *Wonder Stories*: "Our present author . . . has written a science fiction tale so new, so breezy, that it stands out head and shoulders over similar interplanetary stories."

What followed is history. Readers were unreserved in their enthusiasm. The torrent of praise reached such proportions that Hornig, in reply to one reader's exceptionally discerning letter revealed: "Weinbaum's story has already received more praise than any story in the history of our publication."

This statement was no small thing, for even in 1934, *Wonder Stories* had a star-studded five-year history which included outstanding tales by John Taine, Jack Williamson, Clifford D. Simak, David H. Keller, M.D., Ray Cummings, John W. Campbell, Jr., Stanton A. Coblentz, Clark Ashton Smith, Edmond Hamilton, Robert Arthur, H. P. Lovecraft (revising the work of Hazel Heald) and dozens of other names which retain much of their magic, even across the years.

Told in one of the most difficult of narrative techniques, that of the "flashback," the adroitness of handling in *A Martian Odyssey* was in all respects professional. The style was light and jaunty, without once becoming farcical and the characterization brilliantly conceived throughout. A cast of alien creatures that would have seemed bizarre for *The Wizard of Oz*, was somehow brought into dramatic conflict on the red sands of Mars in a wholly believable manner by the stylistic magic of this new author.

It was Weinbaum's creative brilliance in making strange creatures seem as real as the characters in *David Copperfield* that impressed readers the most. "Twe-er-rl," the intelligent Martian, an ostrichlike alien with useful manipular appendages—obviously heir of an advanced technology—is certainly one of the truly great characters in science fiction.

The author placed great emphasis on the possibility that so alien a being would think differently from a human being

and therefore perform actions which would seem paradoxical or completely senseless to us. As presented and developed in *A Martian Odyssey*, this hitherto novel departure gave a new dimension to the interplanetary "Strange encounter" tale.

"Twe-er-r-l" was not the only creature to whom difficult-to-understand psychology was applicable. In *A Martian Odyssey* there was also the silicon monster, who lived on sand, and burped bricks as a by-product, using the bricks to build an endless series of pyramids; round, four-legged creatures, with a pattern of eyes around their circumferences, who spent their entire lives wheeling rubbish to be crushed by a giant wheel which occasionally turned traitor and claimed one of them instead; and finally, a tentacled plant which lured its prey by hypnotically conjuring up wish-fulfillment images.

How thousands of readers felt about Stanley G. Weinbaum can best be summed up by quoting H. P. Lovecraft, even then recognized as one of the great masters of fantasy. "I saw with pleasure that someone had at last escaped the sickening hackneyedness in which 99.99 per cent of all pulp interplanetary stuff is engulfed. Here, I rejoiced, was somebody who could think of another planet in terms of something besides anthropomorphic kings and beautiful princesses and battles of spaceships and ray-guns and attacks from the hairy sub-men of the 'dark side' or 'polar cap' region, etc. etc. Somehow he had the imagination to envisage wholly alien situations and psychologies and entities, to devise consistent events from wholly alien motives and to refrain from the cheap dramatics in which almost all adventure-pulpists wallow. Now and then a touch of the *seemingly* trite would appear—but before long it would be obvious that the author had introduced it merely to satirize it. The light touch did not detract from the interest of the tales—and genuine suspense was secured without the catchpenny tricks of the majority. The tales of Mars, I think, were Weinbaum's best—those in which that curiously sympathetic being 'Tweel' figure."

Too frequently, authors who cause a sensation with a single story, are characterized as having come "out of nowhere." Weinbaum's ability to juggle the entire pantheon of standard science fiction gimmicks and come up with a new angle was not merely a matter of talent. It was grounded in

high intelligence, an excellent scientific background and, most important of all, a thorough knowledge of the field.

Weinbaum had read science fiction since the first issue of *Amazing Stories* appeared on the stands in 1926. Previous to that he had devoured Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, Edgar Allan Poe, Jules Verne, H. G. Wells, A. Conan Doyle and Edgar Rice Burroughs, as well as many of the great Utopian writers.

A graduate chemical engineer, Stanley G. Weinbaum left that field in his early twenties, to try his hand at fiction. His first successful sale was a romantic, popular-type, sophisticated novel, *The Lady Dances*, which was syndicated by King Features in the early 1930's under the pen name of Marge Stanley, a combination of his wife's name and his own because he felt that a woman's name would be more acceptable as a byline on that kind of story.

Several other experimental novels were written during this period, including two that were science fiction; *The Mad Brain* and *The New Adam*. He also turned out an operetta, *Omar, the Tent Maker* with the music written by his sister, Helen Weinbaum Kasson; a short story, *Real and Imaginary*, and a short-short titled *Graph*. None of these were ever submitted to a fantasy periodical during his lifetime. The operetta has never been published or produced. A sheaf of poetry must be in existence. The frequent introduction of brief, poetic passages in almost all of his novels suggests that the urge to write poetry must have been with him all his life.

Weinbaum must have turned to writing because he was a creative artist with a strong urge to write, for certainly, as a means of earning a livelihood during the depression, science fiction was not rewarding. He was 32 years old when *A Martian Odyssey* appeared in *Wonder Stories* and the sum he received for the story, at the prevailing rates, could scarcely have exceeded \$55.

Over at Street and Smith, Desmond Hall, as assistant to F. Orlin Tremaine, read the tale and was greatly impressed. He prevailed upon Julius Schwartz, then the only literary agent specializing solely in science fiction, to see what he could do about getting some Weinbaum material for *Astounding Stories*. Schwartz was also editor of *Fantasy Magazine*, a SF fan publication of exceptional distinction, as well as a partner in the *Solar Sales Service* with his close friend, Mort Weisinger. He had entry to all editorial offices.

The problem now was how to secure Weinbaum's address.

"Everyone believes that Weinbaum is a pen name for a well-known author," he tossed at Charles D. Hornig, author of *Wonder Stories*.

"You mean, Ralph Milne Farley?" Hornig queried, after checking his files and noting that both Weinbaum and Farley lived in Milwaukee. His expression was noncommittal.

"What address did Farley use?" Schwartz asked, hoping that Hornig would be reasonably co-operative.

Hornig mentioned an Oakland Avenue address.

That was all Schwartz needed to know. He wrote Weinbaum and offered to agent his work. Weinbaum agreed and sent him a new short story, *The Circle of Zero*. It was turned down by the entire field, but an agent-author relationship was formed that was to endure long after Weinbaum's death and become a major factor in the perpetuation of his fame.

Anxious to capitalize upon the popularity of *A Martian Odyssey*, Charles D. Hornig urged Weinbaum to write a sequel. Weinbaum agreed and then played a strangely acceptable trick upon his readers.

An earlier draft of *A Martian Odyssey* had been titled *Valley of Dreams*. Weinbaum found that with a few additions and a little rewriting, it would serve magnificently as a sequel. He made the changes and sent it to *Wonder Stories*. The story appeared in the November, 1934 issue of that magazine and if the readers suspected they were being entertained by the same story twice, you couldn't tell it from their letters!

Despite the intervention of the intrepid Julius Schwartz, *Wonder Stories* might have kept Weinbaum on an exclusive basis a while longer had it not been for an over-exacting editorial policy. Weinbaum had submitted *Flight on Titan*, an adroitly written novelette, speckled with such strange life-forms as "knife kites," "ice ants," "whiplash trees" and "threadworms." It was not up to the level of the *Odyssey* series, but was considered superior to the general level of fiction that was running at the time.

Nevertheless, the story was rejected because it did not contain a "new" idea and Schwartz, toting it like a football around the end, triumphed with a touchdown at *Astounding Stories*. The story was instantly accepted.

Parasite Planet, which appeared in *Astounding Stories* for March, 1935, the month after *Flight on Titan*, was the first of a trilogy featuring Ham Hammond and Patricia Burlingame. Though this story was merely a light romantic travelogue, the slick magazine handling of the excursion across Venus with its Jack Ketch Trees which whirled lassos to catch their food; doughpots, mindless omnivorous masses of animate cells and the cyclops-like, semi-intelligent *triops noctivans*, charmed the readers with a spell reminiscent of *Martian Odyssey*.

In a sense, all of Weinbaum's stories were alien-world travel tales. The plot in each of them was a perilous quest. Beginning with his tales in *Astounding Stories*, Weinbaum introduced a maturely-shaded boy-meets-girl element, something brand new for the science fiction of 1935, and he handled it as well as the best of the women's-magazine specialists. The wonderful, outré creatures he invented were frosting on the cake, comprising an entirely irresistible formula.

To all this Weinbaum now added a fascinating dash of philosophy with *The Lotus Eaters*, a novelette appearing in the April, 1935 *Astounding Stories* and unquestionably one of his most brilliant masterpieces.

On the dark side of Venus, Ham and Pat meet a strange cavern-dwelling creature, actually a warm-blooded plant; looking like nothing so much as an inverted bushel basket, whom they dub "Oscar." Almost intellectually omnipotent, Oscar is able to arrive at the most astonishingly accurate conclusions about his world and the universe by extrapolating from the elementary exchanges of information. Despite his intelligence, Oscar has no philosophical objection to being eaten by the malevolent trioptes, predatory marauders of his world.

The entire story is nothing more than a series of questions and answers between the lead characters and Oscar, yet the reader becomes so absorbed that he might very easily imagine himself to be under the influence of the narcotic spores which are responsible for the Venusian's pontifical inertia.

Economic considerations as well as loyalty to the magazine which had published his first important science fiction story required that Weinbaum continue to consider *Wonder Stories* as a market, despite its low word-rates. Realizing that the

magazine was reluctant to publish stories that did not feature a new concept, he gave them what they wanted, selling in a single month, December, 1934, three short stories, *Pygmalion's Spectacles*, *The Worlds of If* and *The Ideal*. The first, appearing in the June, 1935 *Wonder Stories*, centres about the invention of a new type of motion picture, where the viewer actually thinks he is participating in the action.

The motion picture involves a delightful boy-meets-girl romance, ending when the viewer comes awake from the hypnotic effect of the film, to learn that he has participated in a fantasy. All is happily resolved when he finds that the feminine lead was played by the inventor's daughter and romance is still possible.

The Worlds of If was the first of a series of three stories involving Professor Van Manderpootz, an erratic bearded scientist and young Dixon Wells, who is always late and always sorry. The plot revolves around a machine that will show the viewer what would have happened *if*—he had married a woman other than his wife; not gone to college; flunked his final exams or taken that other job. The humour is broad and the plotting a bit too synoptic to be effective.

The second story in the series, *The Ideal*, has for its theme the building of a machine which will reveal a man's mental and emotional orientation to reality through a systematic exploration of his subconscious motives.

The final story, *The Point of View*, is based on the imaginative assumption that, through the use of an even more remarkable machine—an "attitudinizer" one can see the world through the minds of others. The three stories are almost identical, varied only by the nature of the invention itself.

Despite their slightness, the Van Manderpootz series are important because fascinating philosophical speculations accompany each mechanical gimmick description. Enlivened by humour and carried easily along by a highly polished style, Weinbaum's artistry now effectively disguised the fact that a philosopher was at work.

Understandably, gaining confidence with success, Weinbaum embarked on a more ambitious writing programme. He began work on a masterful short novel, the 25,000 word *Dawn of Flame*, featuring a woman of extraordinary beauty, Black Margot, and stressing human characterization and

emotional conflict. A disappointment awaited him, however. The complete novel went the rounds of the magazines and was rejected as not being scientific or fantastic enough.

He altered the formula slightly, still featuring Black Margot, but sacrificing some of the literary quality for the sake of action and adventure. The new and much longer version—it ran to 65,000 words—was called *The Black Flame*.

With its traditional hero from the present awakening in the future to find himself in a divided world, a beautiful princess and a strange contrast of advanced science and medieval battle; fast pace and colour, it should have been the answer to a pulp editor's dream. The novel was rejected for the second time.

In his home city Weinbaum was invited to join a group of fiction writers who called themselves The Milwaukee Fictioneers. Members of the circle included Ralph Milne Farley, who had earned a considerable reputation as creator of *The Radio Series* and other science fiction novels for *Argosy*; Raymond A. Palmer, the future editor of *Amazing Stories*; Arthur R. Tofté, an occasional contributor to the science fiction magazines and Lawrence A. Keating, a popular western story writer of the thirties. With his ready, unaffected wit and his interest in people and the world, Stanley Grauman Weinbaum quickly won the sincere friendship of the entire group.

Within a few months, Ralph Milne Farley—actually the pen name of Roger Sherman Hoar, a former Wisconsin Senator—who was doing a series of detective stories for *True Gang Life*, suggested a collaboration. Weinbaum wrote with Farley, *Yellow Slaves*, which appeared in *True Gang Life*, for February, 1936.

This was the beginning of several other Weinbaum-Farley collaborations, including *Smothered Seas*, which appeared in *Astounding Stories* for January, 1936. It deals with the appearance of a strange algae which forms a scum over the surface of the seas of the world and then covers the continents, impeding transportation. It is a pleasant but undistinguished story.

The collaborative method followed by Weinbaum and Farley was puzzling. Weinbaum would complete the entire

first draft, and Farley would fill in the details and do the final polishing job. This seems strange, in view of the fact that Weinbaum was a master stylist, capable of writing the most finished prose.

The rejection of *Flame* now convinced Weinbaum, that he would either have to write formula material for the pulps, *a formula of his own invention*, or go unpublished. Precious months had gone by in which he had written stories which satisfied him artistically, but produced no income. The pay records of his agent, Julius Schwartz, show that Weinbaum derived not a penny from writing science fiction from the end of December, 1934, until June 15, 1935 when *The Planet of Doubt* brought a check for \$110 from Tremaine's *Astounding Stories*.

As the final story of the Ham and Pat series, *The Planet of Doubt* suffers by comparison with *The Lotus Eaters*. It is evident at this point that Weinbaum was planet-hopping for immediate remuneration and not for the satisfaction of using his talent to its utmost. But by the time this story appeared in the October, 1935 issue of *Astounding*, Weinbaum could do no wrong, and this amusing tale of the animated linked sausages of Uranus was taken in stride by the readers.

It has been claimed that the pen name John Jessel, used by Weinbaum for his story *The Adaptive Ultimate*, was adopted because he feared that too many stories bearing his own name were appearing in *Astounding Stories* and that an increase in their number would not be wise.

The records of checks received at the time from his agent does not bear this out. Weinbaum had made no sales to *Astounding* for over six months. While Weinbaum may have *thought* that recent rejections were the result of too many appearances in *Astounding*, it seems far more likely that he had been "typed" and that Tremaine believed that the readers would look with disfavour upon any departure from his original narrative technique.

Strengthening this possibility is the experience of John W. Campbell, Jr., who gained fame as a super-science writer in the Edward E. Smith tradition, with novels like *The Black Star Passes*, *Islands in Space* and *The Mightiest Machine*, and found it necessary to switch to the pen name of Don A. Stuart for his mood stories, *Twilight* and *Night*, so as not to disorient his readers.

John Jessel was the name of Weinbaum's grandfather and the first story submitted to *Astounding* under that name, *The Adaptive Ultimate*, was a complete departure from the type of science fiction which established Weinbaum as an outstanding writer in the genre.

Whereas the Martian and Venus stories had been almost plotless travelogues, made narratively diversified by ingenious inventiveness and brilliance of style, *The Adaptive Ultimate* was the most carefully plotted of all Weinbaum's magazine stories. With possible slight overtones derived from David H. Keller's poignant *Life Everlasting*—the more likely since Weinbaum listed Keller as one of his favourite authors—*The Adaptive Ultimate* deals with a tubercular girl who is injected with a drug that makes her body instantly adaptable to any environmental change. The result is the cure of her affliction, radiant beauty, high intelligence and the astonishing ability to defeat death by overcoming every possible obstacle.

The Adaptive Ultimate was the first Weinbaum story to be anthologized, appearing in *The Other Worlds*, a fantasy volume edited by Phil Stong in 1941. It has been dramatised on the radio at least twice, the last time on *Tales of Tomorrow* in August, 1952. *Studio One* produced it as a full length show on television under the title of *Kyras Zelas* and it was re-enacted twice more under different titles and later released as a motion picture called *She Devils*.

The strength of this story, so adaptable to the media of radio, television and motion pictures, rests in its compelling, powerful plot. It clearly showed that Weinbaum could be, when the market permitted him, considerably more than a mere literary stylist.

When Weinbaum wrote Schwartz on July 10th, 1935, "I have been laid up as the result of a tonsil extraction for the past several weeks but expect to be able to send you material at a pretty steady rate from now on," there seemed to be little reason for concern. Weinbaum had already begun work on a second story under the John Jessel byline, *Proteus Island*. On August 6th, 1935 he wrote to Schwartz in a somewhat disturbing vein. "Have been laid up again with a sort of imitation pneumonia as a complication from the tonsil extraction, and as a result the John Jessel story is still in the process of being finished."

Proteus Island was an adroitly written 13,000-word biological tale about an island where an ill-advised professor's

experiment has changed the genetic structure of all animal life and vegetation, so that no two things are alike. The tale is weakened when Weinbaum fails to take full advantage of the potentially powerful plot situation and the story found acceptance nowhere under the John Jessel name.

It was obvious now that Weinbaum was a sick man. Each of his letters spoke of heavier and heavier X-Ray treatments which drained him of energy for long periods of time. Despite this, he continued to write. *The Red Peri* sold to *Astounding Stories* on August 17th, 1935, brought \$190 and was featured on the cover of the November, 1935 number. In an editorial in that issue, Tremaine wrote: "Stanley G. Weinbaum has been very ill. I hope he's able to sit up and enjoy this month's cover to see *The Red Peri* in print."

The Red Peri is a woman space pirate of phenomenal cunning, daring and beauty. The story was intended as the first of a series. Standing by itself, it proved an entertaining adventure story, barely classifying as science fiction, despite its interplanetary locale and the interesting concept that the vacuum of space would be harmless to a human being for short stretches of time.

In the same issue *The Adaptive Ultimate* appeared as a featured novelette, with its "super-woman" heroine. Add to these the immortal Black Margot of Urbs, from the Flame novels and the dominant characteristics of Patricia Burlingame of the Ham and Pat series and we find in Weinbaum a powerful fixation with the concept of the super-woman, who is brought into line by love of a man. This might be evidence of domination by a strong woman somewhere in his life or, more probably of his subconscious wish to meet a woman who was his intellectual equal.

Despite his illness, Weinbaum continued with his writing, careful to turn out the kind of stories he knew the magazines would buy. *Smothered Seas*, in collaboration with Ralph Milne Farley and *The Mad Moon* were sold on the same day, September 27th, for \$110 and \$100 respectively.

The Mad Moon is one of the finest of his queer animal stories. It combines such novel creations as the long-necked, big-headed, giggling "loonies"; a "parcat," half cat—half parrot; and semi-intelligent, rat-like "slinkers." Bizarre as this menagerie was, Weinbaum combined them all into a delightful, straight-faced minor masterpiece with just enough pathos to lift it out of the category of ordinary adventures.

The Mad Moon was probably the last story Weinbaum ever saw in print. On November 19th he wrote Schwartz: "Lord knows I'm pleased to get your check on *Redemption Cairn*. I've been in Chicago having some X-ray treatments again, and I'm flat on my back recovering from them. I don't know when I'll be able to get some real work done."

He never stopped trying. According to Ralph Milne Farley, though pain-wracked by throat cancer and barely able to speak above a whisper, he continued to work on *The Dictator's Sister*, the first draft of which he finished before he died.

December 14th, 1935, Julius Schwartz, while in the synagogue, received the following telegram from Ray Palmer: "*Weinbaum died early this morning.*" Though he had never met the man, Schwartz broke down and wept. At the end of the ceremony he offered a prayer for Weinbaum, who was of his faith.

"Did you know that Stanley Weinbaum took off on the Last Great Journey through the galaxies in December?" F. Orlin Tremaine informed his readers in *Astounding*. "That he set his course by the stars I do not doubt. *Astounding Stories* is proud of his accomplishments in science fiction. He created a niche for himself which will be hard to fill."

"A few months before his untimely death," Charles D. Hornig, Weinbaum's discoverer wrote in an obituary in the April, 1936 *Wonder Stories*, which ironically marked the end of that magazine under Gernback's ownership, "he promised us a third tale in the 'Martian' series—but did not have time to complete it."

Fifteen months after his first science fiction story appeared, Stanley G. Weinbaum's meteoric career had ended.

Few men were as instantaneously liked as Weinbaum. He seemed to be surrounded by a sort of radiance, both mental and physical, but he was modest and unaffected with an outgoing friendliness and a genuine interest in people. Under the sponsorship of the Milwaukee Fictioneers, a memorial volume was published soon after Weinbaum's death. Conrad H. Ruppert, who printed *Fantasy Magazine*, the fan publication edited by Julius Schwartz, played a key role in the preparation of this volume. He set the type of the 313-page *Dawn of Flame and Other Stories* by hand and ran it off

two pages at a time in a strictly limited edition of 250 copies. The sheets were sent to Raymond A. Palmer in Milwaukee, who arranged with a binder to have the book bound in black leather and stamped in gold.

This was the first appearance of *Dawn of Flame*, a 25,000 word short novel, anywhere, and it revealed Stanley G. Weinbaum as a completely mature literary craftsman, tremendously talented in dialogue and superbly skilled in characterization. There is high poetry in the closing passages: ". . . Black Margot rode north from Selu through the night. In the sky before her were thin shadows leading phantom armies. Alexander the Great, Attila, Genghiz Khan, Tamurlane, Napoleon, and clearer than all, the battle queen Semiramis. All the mighty conquerers of the past, and where were *they*, where were their empires, and where, even, their bones? Far in the south were the graves of the men who had loved her, all except old Einer, who tottered like a feeble grey ghost across the world to find his."

The volume contained six shorter stories—*The Mad Moon*, *A Martian Odessey*, *The Worlds of If*, *The Adaptive Ultimate*, *The Lotus Eaters* and *The Red Peri*. The introduction by Raymond A. Palmer was deemed too personal by Weinbaum's widow, so another by Lawrence A. Keating was substituted. Six copies with Palmer's introduction are known to exist.

Gernsback's *Wonder Stories* was purchased by Standard Magazines and came under the editorial directorship of Leo Margulies. Margulies placed Mort Weisinger, Julius Schwartz' partner in the *Solar Sales Service* in charge of the magazine, which the Standard group re-titled *Thrilling Wonder Stories*. Weisinger immediately decided to publish *The Circle of Zero*. An "idea" story, similar in mood to the Professor van Manderpootz series, it deals with the drawing up of memories from the past *and* the future. Too heavy on theory and too light on action, it reads more like a cinema synopsis than a completed work of fiction.

Learning for the first time that John Jessel was really a pen name for Stanley G. Weinbaum, Tremaine changed his mind about *Proteus Island* and published the novelette in the August, 1936 *Astounding Stories*.

A short story, *Shifting Seas*, which had been sold to *Amazing Stories*, shortly before Weinbaum's death, eventually appeared in the August, 1937 issue. It was a minor effort

dealing with a volcanic explosion that diverts the gulf stream, almost freezing out Europe, and the eventual solution of the problem by the construction of an under-sea wall.

Now the search through Weinbaum's old papers, began in earnest. The first story to be rescued from obscurity was *Real and Imaginary*, a charming piece which turned on the solution to a mathematical formula. Re-titled *Brink of Infinity*, it was greeted with enthusiasm when it appeared in *Thrilling Wonder Stories* for December, 1936. No one noticed that it was actually a condensation and re-write of George Allan England's *The Tenth Question*, which appeared in the December 18th, 1915 issue of *All-Story Magazine*. Obviously *Brink of Infinity* was an early exercise in writing which Weinbaum never intended to have published.

In 1938, several important changes occurred in the science fiction field. *Amazing Stories* was sold to Ziff-Davis magazines and Raymond A. Palmer became editor. He had Ralph Milne Farley polish Weinbaum's actual last story, *The Dictator's Sister*, which was published under the title of *The Revolution of 1980* in the October and November, 1938 issues of *Amazing Stories*. Having for its theme a dictatorship of the United States, run by a woman who, through hormone injections has changed herself into a man, the story is excellent light entertainment.

The Black Flame, purchased at a bargain price of \$200 for 65,000 words, helped insure the success of the first—January, 1939—issue of *Startling Stories*. There seemed to be no end to "last" stories by Stanley G. Weinbaum. His sister, Helen Kasson, finished one, *Tidal Moon*, which was published in *Thrilling Wonder*, December, 1938, but as he had written only a page and a half and had left no outline, it was not significant.

Firmly entrenched at Ziff-Davis, which brought out books as well as periodicals, Raymond A. Palmer persuaded the publishers that it would be a good idea to consider seriously Weinbaum's early philosophical novel, *The New Adam*. This appeared in hard covers in 1939 with some rather ambiguous endorsements from Edgar Rice Burroughs, A. Merritt, Ralph Milne Farley and Raymond A. Palmer on the inner jacket. A story of a superman with a dual mind who, because of his fatal passion for a woman, sacrifices the opportunity to lead the race that will replace humanity, is morbidly fascinating despite its gloomy outlook.

It seemed incredible that the same man who wrote with the delightfully light touch in *A Martian Odyssey* and who was able to produce so gay a frolic as *The Mad Moon* while dying of cancer, could have been so devout a disciple of Schopenhauer in a more youthful period.

Still another very early novel, *The Mad Brain*, was condensed into novelette form and peddled by Julius Schwartz to the magazines with no takers. Finally it was published complete as *The Dark Other* in book form by the Fantasy Publishing Co., Inc., Los Angeles, in 1950. Based on the Jekyll and Hyde theme, it seems hardly worthy of Weinbaums unique talent and is of interest chiefly as a collector's item.

In the final analysis, the true importance of Weinbaum can best be estimated by his influence. No less a master of science fiction than Eric Frank Russell, quite frankly imitated both Weinbaum's style and copied his facility for queer animals to score a success with *The Saga of Pelican West*, published in *Astounding Stories* for Feb., 1937; Henry Kuttner attracted attention in science fiction by teaming up with Arthur K. Barnes to produce the Hollywood-on-the-Moon Stories, mimicking Weinbaum even down to the characters Tommy Strike and Gerry Carlyle who were little more than carbon copies of Ham and Pat; John Russell Fearn, a very popular science fiction writer during the late thirties, invented the pen name of Polton Cross, just to write stories that were parodies of Weinbaum.

More subtly, Weinbaum's methods have influenced dozens of other authors, most strikingly Philip José Farmer in his masterpiece, *The Lovers*, a tale which would have done Weinbaum no discredit.

How enduring Weinbaum's personal reputation will be depends upon a relatively small number of stories, probably *A Martian Odyssey*, *The Lotus Eaters*, *The Adaptive Ultimate*, *The Dawn of Flame*, and, paradoxically, *The Brink of Infinity*.

The short period of writing before the curtain descended, the insistence of editors that he write to a formula, the ravages of illness and the economic depression make it remarkable that he achieved even as much as he did. The legacy he left the science fiction world, however, is still apparent everywhere.

—Sam Moskowitz

We first met Chappie Jones, Yalna and Cayenne Pepper in a weird-fantasy story entitled "The Black Cat's Paw" back in issue No. 44. At the end of that story their troubles were by no means over, as the following gruesome anecdote will explain.

THE VEIL OF ISIS

BY JOHN RACKHAM

o n e

It was not until the doorbell had rung a second time that it came to me, through a veil of daydream, that I was all alone in the house. Guiltily, I got up from my pleasant seat by the window, leaving the flowers in the garden to get on with their business of being beautiful. I wondered, idly, who it could be. Yalna had gone off to the West-End, to shop, and Ken Wilson with her. On a day as warm as this, I didn't envy them. But they each had a key. Hassim was in Egypt, attending to some family business, and expected back at any time, but he, too, had his own key. And we discourage chance callers.

So, by the time I had reached the long, cool, tiled passage, I had deduced 'tradesman' and had a 'No, thank you' all ready to say, as I opened the door. I was quite wrong.

She was taller, by an inch or two, than average. Slim, self-possessed and poised. Charcoal-grey costume, paper-white blouse, flat box of a hat, not too ridiculous, and glossy gold

hair. Scrubbed, groomed and it was all a front ; made you wonder what she was really like, inside. She thrust a card at me, with a hint of impatience in her lively green eyes.

"Good afternoon," she said, firmly, and I caught a faint breath of a discreet soap-smell. "I'm Karen Marly. I'd like to speak to Doctor Wilson, please."

As I studied her card, I could feel those green eyes ticking off every detail of my sordid appearance—shirt-sleeves, ancient slacks, scuffed slippers—and the card said she was connected with *Feminine*. Guessing from the address, it was a journal, or magazine. I'd not heard of it, but that didn't mean anything. There are so many of them, nowadays.

"I'm sorry," I said. "Doctor Wilson isn't at home."

"When will he be home?"

"I haven't the faintest . . ." I looked at the card again, pointedly, then at her. "You're sure it is Doctor Wilson you want? K. N. Wilson?"

"The Egyptologist," she said, letting her impatience show a bit. "Do you usually keep visitors chaffering on the doorstep, Mr . . .?"

"Jones," I said, helpfully. "Chappie Jones. That's a good old word, isn't it . . . 'Chaffering.' Haven't heard it in ages. But we don't welcome casual visitors, Miss Marly. You should have phoned."

"Oh, this is ridiculous !" she said, and little spots of colour flared at her cheekbones. "*Feminine* is planning an illustrated series of articles on 'Fashion Through the Ages,' and I wish to interview Doctor Wilson, to ask him to guarantee the authenticity of the Egyptian section. That's all. I suppose I should have phoned first. But I've come a long way, on a very hot afternoon. What am I supposed to do, now. Sit on the step, or walk up and down the High Street until he comes?"

"There are plenty of cafes and snack-bars," I said, uncomfortably. She had me in a worse fix than she knew. Time and again, Ken Wilson had pressed it home to us, and myself in particular. 'We have crossed and thwarted a very dangerous and powerful man. We must assume that he will be out for revenge. Take no chances, of any kind.' Now, I couldn't see any menace about Miss Marly, except as a predatory female, perhaps, but Wilson's influence was so strong that I

was, quite literally, afraid to let her in. With true feminine intuition, she put her finger on it, at once.

"Surely you're not afraid of me?" she snapped.

"Not of you," I could feel my face going red, "but Pepper would skin me if I disregarded his orders."

"Pepper?"

"A nick-name," I explained. "From his initials, you know. K.N. . . ." and I bit my tongue, but it was too late. She had whipped out a note-book, to scribble it down.

"Background," she explained. "The human touch. Foibles of a great man. That sort of thing. Look here, Mr. Jones, let's be reasonable about this. If I can get the odd personal details from you, while we wait, then the interview will be just that much shorter, when Doctor Wilson does come home. That's not much to ask, is it?" She was smiling, now, and there was a wheedle in her tone. It was all wrong, as she was obviously the type of female to get her own way with men by sheer charm. I hesitated.

Warning or no warning. I stand six foot three and weigh over two hundred pounds, none of it useless fat. I just couldn't see myself as in any sort of danger, of a serious kind, that is, from Miss Marly. There was something else, too, a sort of premonition, that Miss Marly was much more than she seemed to be. I get such feelings, from time to time, and consider them a nuisance, but Ken Wilson sets great store by them. I guessed he would want me to follow this one to its conclusion.

"All right," I said, "I'll chance his wrath, this time," and I stood aside, to let her come in.

"You're very kind," she flashed me a smile. "It will be a relief just to sit down, if nothing else."

"Well . . ." I led her into the lounge, "that much you can have, and welcome, but I don't know about the rest. I doubt if Pepper would want me to tell too much of his private life. He's not too fond of publicity."

She went across the green carpet to the big, leather-bound settee, turned, and sank into it, with a sigh of relief. I couldn't blame her. That settee is even more comfortable than it looks.

"Wonderful!" she sighed. "And I like this room, too. So cool and light, yet friendly. It feels lived in."

"We like it," I said, briefly. That sense of wrongness was growing stronger. She gushed a bit too much, I thought, even

for a lady interviewer. "Can I get you a drink?" I offered. "There's iced tea, if you'd like some. With lemon; no milk and lots of sugar. Just right for a hot day."

"It sounds wonderful," she said. "I'd love to try it."

So I went off to the kitchen, and by the time I'd returned with a couple of tall glasses, she had loosened her jacket and was leaning back, quite at home.

"Will he really be angry?" she asked, as she took her glass, and sipped.

"I doubt it," I said, taking my own glass to sit in an easy chair opposite her. "Come to think of it, I've never seen old Pepper angry."

"Is he old?"

"Lord, no!" I smiled. "He's about my own age, I'd say. Thirty five-ish. Not the sort of person to be afraid of, at all."

"Would you mind," she wriggled slightly, "if I slipped my shoes off? My feet are killing me. Why do we women wear such murderous shoes?"

"Help yourself," I invited. "I'm a great believer in comfort, myself."

Now, I'm neither prude nor voyeur. Watching an attractively-legged girl, in a fashionably short skirt, sunk in the depths of a low settee, taking off her shoes can be an interesting experience. But there is such a thing as reasonable discretion, and Karen Marly had either never heard of it, or didn't care much. It was almost a relief for me to hear the quick double-buzz of the telephone in the hall, and to go to answer it. I recognised the brisk tone and the faint Scots burr, at once.

"Inspector Ferguson," I said, "Chappie Jones, here. What can I do for you?"

"Is Wilson home, just now?"

"Not at the moment, but I'm expecting him at any time."

"Ay, well, I'll chance it. I'm on my way home, now. I'll call in. Be there in about twenty minutes," and he hung up. This, I thought, could become interesting. Inspector Ferguson would hardly be calling to pass the time of day. He had formed the habit of dropping in to discuss some unusual aspect of some crime or other, ever since his first meeting with Ken Wilson, but it would hardly be the kind of chat that should take place within the sharp ear-shot of Miss Marly.

When I returned to the lounge, she was sitting up, with a cigarette between her fingers. She was showing much more

knee than a person with her grooming should. Very nice knee, but it didn't seem right.

"Have you a light?" she held up her cigarette. "My machine has died on me" Perhaps I was uncouth, but I had a sudden disinclination to go near her. I made for my chair, taking a box of matches from my pocket.

"Catch!" I said, and tossed them across.

"Thanks!" she smiled, trapping the box neatly between her knees. That rang a bell, too. Almost. Something itched at the back of my mind, but I couldn't put my finger on it. Then I heard a car in the drive.

"That'll be Doctor Wilson, now," I said, getting up. "Excuse me." She smiled again, pitched back the matchbox. I caught it, slipped it in my pocket. I met Wilson on the step. My face must have told him quite a bit.

"What?" he asked, simply.

"I'm not sure whether you'd call her a reporter, or a journalist, but she is from a glossy fashion magazine, wants to see you, name's Karen Marly." We were in the hall by now, and he looked at her card, where it lay on the hall table.

"I couldn't very well ask her to pace up and down outside," I said, "on a stinking hot day like this." Yalna, right behind him, smiled at me with those incredible blue eyes of hers, mischievously.

"She is attractive, of course," she murmured, and Wilson smiled.

"That's true," I confessed, "but I'll swear there's something odd about her," and Wilson's smile vanished at once.

"I value your intuition, Chappie," he said. "Let's see her, shall we?"

"Another thing," I added, hurriedly, "Ferguson's on his way over. Should be here in about fifteen minutes."

"A busy evening. All right, go ahead, would you, and introduce us?" So I went on, into the lounge where our guest was still displaying her knees. As I turned, in making the conventional sounds, I caught a glimpse of Yalna's face, over Wilson's shoulder. As she stood in the doorway, just for that moment, it was plain that she was weighing up the stranger, comparing the ultra-perfect, glossy blonde fashion-plate with her own rounded, ivory-skinned, black-haired and curvaceous innocence. Just for that instant, she was all tiger-female. Then she was gone along the hall, and I heard Wilson, mildly explaining.

"We don't shake hands in this house, Miss Marly. Just one of our ways. We're a rather eccentric lot, I fear. Please sit down again, and tell me what I can do for you."

I watched her sit, as carelessly as ever, and I could see that Wilson was intrigued. Not that it showed, but I knew him well enough to read the signs. On my own part, I was completely baffled. Although he would be the last person to admit it, K. N. Wilson is a remarkable man. There isn't anything that will go into words to account for the impact of his personality, but it is there. And Miss Marly was the very first person, to my knowledge, who didn't feel it. She simply sat and prattled away, about this series of hers, and historical costume, and her precious magazine, quite happily. Either the woman was as insensitive as a fish, or the Wilson magic was failing.

"I'm sorry," he put up a hand, at last. "Really, I'm not expert on costume. My field is more the psychology and sociology of Ancient Egypt—ah, Yalna, my dear," he got up, smiling. "May I present Miss Marly, correspondent of *Feminine*? My niece, Yalna, Miss Marly. She knows much more than I about your subject."

Yalna had put off her coat, and appeared now in a blue creation which almost matched her eyes. I have no doubt there was a deal of skilled work in that dress, but the effect was one of smooth simplicity. Miss Marly was impressed.

"Excuse me, Doctor Wilson," she breathed, "but this is much more like it. Miss Wilson, I'm sure you must know *heaps* about Egyptian costume." Yalna smiled, looking like a beautiful child against Miss Marly's high-gloss finish.

"I have a whole collection of authentic copies, upstairs," she said, "if you'd like to see them?"

"Wouldn't I just!" They turned their enquiring looks on Wilson, and he nodded. When they had gone, he looked across at me, frowning faintly.

"I quite agree," he murmured. "Something not quite right, there. It could be eccentricity. Her life must be one long pretence, after all. Still . . ." but he was interrupted by the doorbell. "Ah, that will be Ferguson. Let him in, while I get the brandy."

Inspector Ferguson, lean, dour and bristling as ever, spared me a curt nod, and strode into the parlour. The bristle abated

somewhat at sight of the brandy, but he was far from gay as he sank into a deep chair.

"We specialise in odd things, you and I," he said. "In different ways, of course, but I'll bet I've found one that'll beat any you ever heard. Not that I'm dumping my problems in your lap," he managed a grin. "I've my job to do, and I'll do it, forbye." He finished off his drink, accepted one of my cigarettes, and sat back, thoughtfully. "A week ago last Friday. That's when it a' began, and we've been finding them, two a day, in odd places, ever since."

"Finding what?" I asked, as it seemed someone had to.

"Bodies!" he said. "Bodies, stark and cold. Each one wrapped in a winding sheet. Eighteen o' them, so far. I cam' across the seventeenth mysel', this morning, as I was on my way to the Yard. A constable on the beat reported the eighteenth about ten minutes after I got in." I confess I goggled at him.

"Eighteen dead bodies in something under two weeks?" I said. "But there hasn't been anything about this in the news!"

"Sheer luck, that," he muttered. "So far, every last one of them has been found by a constable, or the police, in some way. There'll be hell to pay if and when the newspaper laddies do get hold of it."

"But what on earth's going on? Not gang-warfare, surely?"

"Not in this country, Mr. Jones. Not yet. And I'd not mind if it was as easy as that, forbye. Ye see, the devil of it is, we have been completely unable to identify a single one of them. Not one!" Wilson sat forward, intrigued.

"You've done all the routine things, of course?" he asked. Ferguson gave him a sour look, and a sniff.

"What would you mean by 'routine,' now?" he challenged. Wilson smiled, pushing his long fingers through his hair in a characteristic gesture.

"I don't mean standard operating procedure, such as physical description, finger-prints, and such. Beyond that. You'd look for a pattern of some kind, a common factor in the timing, the places, the age, sex, condition, cause of death—things like that. Yes?"

"Ay, you'd have made a good policeman, I'm thinking. We've done that, and there are patterns, of a kind, but not

much help." He shut his eyes for a moment, in thought. "Ten male, eight female. All about thirty years of age. All white European. All found within a circle about ten miles radius, roughly centred on the Crompton Road—call it the cemetery, if you like."

"What a thought!" I said, as a weird picture came to mind. "It's as if the bodies were coming up out of their graves and leaving the cemetery."

"We've even checked that," Ferguson said, flatly, "but there's no sign of any disturbance. Besides, the bodies are all fresh, if you take my meaning. Not dug up. It's fair got us beat, at the moment. No reports of anyone missing, or killed. No complaints. Nothing!"

"I'm struck by the way they've all been found by law and order," Wilson murmured. "That's a very tall coincidence, indeed. Tell me about the one you found, would you?"

"Well . . ." Ferguson shifted in his chair. "It was like a' the rest, so far as I can tell. I was on my regular route, and early. About eight. I'm aye early, going in, and he told us of the drive through near-deserted streets, the sight of the long white bundle in the gutter, the stop, the quick investigation the guess quickly confirmed. "Just like a' the rest. A man, about thirty, laid out stark naked in a sheet. Nothing else."

"Odd that he hadn't been seen earlier," Wilson mused. "There are quite a few people about, even at that hour. It's as if he had been put there deliberately for you to find."

"Ay, but that's fantastic," Ferguson protested. "Not that the whole business is exactly sensible, mind you, but why would they do a thing like that?"

"Let me try something even more fantastic on you," Wilson smiled. "It's just a guess, mind. Excuse me a moment," and he went out, swiftly. Ferguson stared.

"What's he up to, now? Has he seen something I've missed?"

"I'm beat," I confessed. "Eighteen dead bodies. That wants a bit of taking in, all at once. I remember reading a story, once, about a chap who was experimenting in a laboratory, trying to make human beings. You don't suppose it could be anything like that, do you?" Ferguson didn't bother to reply. His expression of scorn was enough.

t w o

Wilson came back with a small silver vial in his fingers.

"How's your sense of smell?" he asked, and Ferguson raised his brows.

"It's aye served me up to now. Why?"

"I'd like you to shut your eyes; try to recall the moment when you bent over the body, to unwrap it. It's early morning, you're kneeling, pulling back the sheet, looking. And there is a smell . . ." he held the uncapped vial close to the Inspector's face.

"Ay, that's it," Ferguson muttered. "Faint like a kind of fancy soap, but with a difference." He opened his eyes, to stare at Wilson. "What is it?" I came across, to try a sniff, and I almost recognised it.

"Odd!" I said, "but I could swear I've smelled that same smell, quite recently." Wilson gave me a sharp look, then shrugged.

"It was a very long shot," he murmured, "and now that it's come off, I'm not quite sure what to make of it. It would be pointless to try to tell you what I have in mind, at this stage. Just a glimmering, that's all. This . . ." he held up the vial, ". . . contains a mixture of certain oils. Cedar, myrrh, cinnamon, cassia, senna and other things—natron, terebinth—turpentine, to you. It is, in fact, a reconstruction of the embalming fluid used in Ancient Egypt!"

The expression on Ferguson's face would have been worth a pound or two, if I could have caught it with a camera.

"Och!" he said, in thick disgust. "That makes no sense to me, at a'. I think you're having me on!"

"Never!" Wilson declared. "I wouldn't dream of it." Then there was a quick step on the stair and we all rose as the two women rejoined us. I saw Miss Marly's green eyes flicker as she heard Ferguson's profession and status, but it was too quickly gone to be significant. Then Yalna spoke.

"Uncle Ken!" she said, excitedly. "Miss Marly has had a wonderful idea. She's seen my costumes, and would like me to model them, for her paper."

"It's the obvious thing," Miss Marly said, firmly. "She knows the clothes, they fit her, and she looks the part. No professional model could do so well."

"I see," Wilson nodded. "But what would be involved? Would your photographer come here?"

"He could, of course," she said, "but it would be much simpler if Miss Wilson could come to the studio. In any event, I'd like to consult our man, at once, just in case there are any queries. I'd particularly like him to see Miss Wilson, as his word would count, you know." I could see that Wilson was none too keen on this, but Yalna was obviously itching to be off, by her face.

"All right," he said, at last. "I suppose there can be no harm in it. Where is the studio?" She named an address in Shepherd's Bush.

"He's not famous," she said. "But a first-class man. We find his work very satisfactory, and I happen to know that he'll be there, now."

"Very well. I will make just one condition. Mr. Jones will go with you, to bring Miss Wilson home."

"That's all right with me," I said, at once. "Just give me a minute to get my jacket, and tidy up a bit." Ferguson chimed in.

"If you're quick, Jones, I'll give you all a lift. It's none too far out of my way." So off I went, and by the time I got back, Ferguson was in the hall, with the ladies, waiting for me. Wilson lifted a finger, silently, to call me.

"I've only shreds of evidence, and I've no wish to be mysterious, Chappie, so I'll just say this. Don't take anything that even looks like a risk. I'm not too happy about Miss Marly."

"You feel it too, then?"

"I do, but I can't put it in a word. It may sound insane to you, but I'd like to see her thread a needle, sometime." There was no time to say more, and I went out to the car with my head spinning. Yalna sat in front, with Ferguson, and I folded myself into the back alongside Miss Marly. I welcomed the chance to study her, for Wilson had seen what I had missed.

Miss Karen Marly, glossily feminine, sure of herself, but somehow repellent. Careless with her skirt, even now, in the car. She had caught a matchbox by trapping it between her knees. She had pitched it back, accurately. She had risen when Wilson came in. Now that Wilson had opened my eyes, there were a host of other little touches I could recall, in confirmation. Yet for all that, I had difficulty in believing that this creature beside me was, in fact, male. Like Wilson, I'd

have given a lot for the chance to watch her thread a needle. I'd have liked better to have a minute or two with Yalna, to get her impression, but neither test was available. I would just have to rely on naked-eye observation. My very first conclusion was that if this was impersonation, it was superbly done. Figures and shapes can be faked, of course, even legs as shapely as those Miss Marly was making me free of in the cramped rear seat. But faces are something else again.

In the course of a somewhat irregular life I have done a fair amount of sketching and drawing. There are certain structural differences between the male and female face, especially in profile, if you know where to look. I looked. And I began to have doubts about Wilson's guess, and my own. The glossy golden hair might be a wig, and the flawless complexion a paint-job, but there was no fake about that smooth curve from brow to nose. Fortunately she was too intent on the road to notice my keen scrutiny.

"This is it, Inspector," she said, suddenly. "Turn left at the next lot of traffic-lights, and slow. It's a side-alley."

We got out to dingy shops, staring blindly. The sun had long since left this street gloomy. Miss Marly thanked the Inspector, briskly, and led us away to a dark door between two shop-fronts. A visiting-card, sharp white against the dark wood, bore the name ASHLEY COWLE. Modest, I thought, as Miss Marly shoved the door open and led us to the foot of a long flight of stairs. She went up, Yalna following. I came close enough to whisper to her.

"Quietly . . ." I said. "What do you make of the lady?"

"Odd you should ask," she whispered back. "I get a complete blank. Can't feel her, at all. And she kept on asking me about the 'Veil of Isis,' as if it was some sort of costume."

"Isn't it?"

"Not that I've ever heard of . . ." and we had reached the top of the stairs, and a small landing, so the whispering had to stop. Again a door, with the white card, and the name. Miss Marly knocked, and went straight in. We followed, into a small room, with noisy linoleum on the floor, and four uncomfortable-looking chairs grouped round a plain wood table. Against the far wall, near another door, stood a wood-backed settee. The place had the air of an old-fashioned G.P.'s waiting-room, and when that far door opened to admit a man in a chalky-grey gown, the 'medical' feel was heightened.

This, I assumed, was Ashley Cowle, and I took a dislike to him, on sight. He had a thin face, surmounted by a high-domed forehead, with a cross-drape of black, wispy hair. Shortish, about five-foot three. Yalna topped him by an inch, and Miss Marly by three. It didn't seem to bother him, at all. The whole time Miss Marly was explaining, he couldn't take his eyes off Yalna.

"So there you are," she finished up, urgently. "If you think it will be all right, I'll pass the word straight on to my editor. What do you think?" Cowle took a pace back, put up his hands, about a foot apart, and peered through them, just the way film producers are supposed to do, on the films. He had a broad-banded ring on his left thumb, set with zodiac signs, in relief. In a surprisingly deep voice, he said.

"I think so, yes. But I cannot be sure, here. You will come inside." I wondered at his nationality. Not English, I'd swear. Then, so smooth and swift that I never had the chance to object, the three of them went through the door, and it clicked shut in my face, leaving me all alone. I didn't like it, at all, but what was I to do? I didn't fancy making a fool of myself by battering on the door, and vague notions about dark-rooms helped to deter me, but I felt growing uneasiness. I didn't like letting Yalna out of my sight, that was the point.

In my decision, I ran my finger along the back of the settee, by the door. It came away thick with dust. I stared at it, foolishly, for a moment, then eyed the room with new interest. Now I saw what I had overlooked before, that the table, the chairs, even the one window-pane, were all thinly filmed with dust, as if no-one had used this place in months. I must have stood there some ten seconds, thinking all sorts of things, most of them unpleasant, when there was a heavy thump from the next room, a scream that choked off, suddenly, and then a crash that shook the floor.

I am not impulsive, as a rule, but I was at that door before the echoes of that crash had died. One jerk on the knob was enough to tell me it was fast, and only a fool would charge an outward opening door. But I had met this kind of thing before. I slammed both elbows at the panels, together, and they split away, far enough to give me a double hand-grip on the centre upright. One good jerk, and a silent thanks to the fate that had given me the build to do it, and the door came away bodily. I shoved it to one side and went in, with a rush, into dim-lit gloom to catch my foot and trip over something

stretched out across the doorway. Even as I went down, twisting desperately to get a hand and knee to break my fall, I saw that it was Miss Marly. Then I scrambled up, stood—and got a bash to the side of my head that sent me reeling sideways.

Almost automatically, I put up my hands, shook my head to clear my vision, and found myself facing a great hulk of a man, my own height, and half again as heavy, by the look of him. What was left of his hair was a faded ginger, round the base of a bald dome. One eye was a blank hollow, the other gleamed beadily at me from a gross, twisted face, jowly with fat. He had a chest like a barrel, and great ham hands reaching out to grapple me, eagerly. I knocked one arm down, slammed him in the belly, twice, as hard as I could hit, parried a right-hander that jarred my arm to the shoulder, and we gave way for a bit, time for me to snatch a quick glance round the room. It was thick with dust, dingily empty, not a stick of furniture anywhere. A fly-specked bulb hung from frayed flex. A single, narrow window stood open in the far wall. The faded wallpaper had begun to peel. Of Cowle, or Yalna, there was no sign.

The fat man came for me again, steadily, heavily. It did me no good at all to realise that this must have been a put up job, all the way, but I was too busy to dwell on it. My blows had made him gasp, but they had shown me he wasn't *all* fat. My urgent need was to get clear of him, to see where Yalna had gone. I hit him in the face with a left, and a right, and backed away, hoping to dodge round him, but he just shook his head and came on. He was slow, but hurt-proof. I hit him again, and blood spurted. Again, as hard as I could, so that the impact jarred my arm. But he came on, to crowd me against the wall. Again I slammed my fist in his face, and he caught my arm in those great ham-hands, like a vice.

In desperation I chopped him in the crook of the neck with my right hand, and, as he snarled and dragged on my arm, I fell towards him and across, to stoop, and twist, and heave, and he sailed over my shoulder like a sack of potatoes, to crash smack into the wall. It gave me the moment I wanted, to rush across to the window and look out. But it was only a dark mews. Nothing there but blank windows, grimy walls, and silence. I heard the fat man snorting as he got up. I was sick with despair as I turned to face him. He had used his face to meet the wall, and was a horrid sight, but it made no appreciable effect on his intent. I am not, by nature, a violent person, nor

am I greatly skilled in fighting. I had hit him with everything I could bring to bear, and it hadn't even slowed him down. With very little hope, I went to meet him. I hit him, in the belly, in the face, again and again, putting all my energy into the blows. And then he caught my arm again, blind but tenacious.

There was nothing for it but to kick his feet out from under him, and fall on him, and be quick about it, for his hands were like steel clamps. The floor shook, and his breath whooshed out. I managed to wrench free and get up. But it was useless. Short of kicking him, and I was tempted, but I left it too late. He was up, trundling after me. I backed off, caught my heel on Miss Marly's outflung arm, and fell, backwards. There was a flash of bright light, a pain that burst—then darkness. Then nothing at all.

I woke unwillingly. It was something I had not expected to do, anyway. They say life is sweet. At that moment I would gladly have quit mine, to return to blissful nothingness. I would never have believed that a head could ache like mine without bursting. On further exploration I found that I ached just about everywhere else too. I opened my eyes to dim gloom, tried to sit up, and my stomach churned, so that I lay back, and groaned. Then I thought of Yalna, and made another effort. My watch was still going. With insane visions of writing a testimonial to the makers, I peered at the dial, and it was just coming up to nine o'clock. I'd been out about three hours.

I went to get up, and put my hand on something soft. A second touch, and I knew it was Miss Marly. Details began to filter back. In the gloom she was just a dark blur, and quite still. She must have been lying there, all the time, without any attention. I felt a twinge of guilt. With an effort, I got to my feet, to lean against the wall until the floor stopped going up and down. Then, using the dull grey of the window as a guide, I aimed for the door, found the light switch, and it still worked. The single naked bulb shed a harsh light. There was no sign of the fat man. It might all have been a bad dream, but for the bloody smear on the wall. And Miss Marly. I went back to her. She was alive, and breathing, but completely out. As I turned her over, I could see why. There was a gash in her head, from hair-line to cheekbone, on the left side, and her face was black with dirt and dried blood. Too, after I'd checked her heart-beat, I was certain she was female. But there was nothing I could do for her, alone.

Gaining strength every minute, I made my way out, down the stairs, into the alley. No-one saw me, which was a blessing both ways. There was a telephone booth on the corner. Empty. I had fourpence, too. Somehow, this steady run of good fortune cheered me. Perhaps the peak of adversity was past. My spirits went up yet another notch when I heard Wilson's quiet voice.

"Chappie here," I said. "I'm afraid it's very bad, Pepper. The whole thing was a trap. They've got Yalna."

"Where are you, now?"

"Phone-box. Corner of the street. I can see the door from here. Number twelve. No-one about."

"Right. Go back there, and sit tight. Just a moment. Ferguson put you down there, didn't he?"

"That's right. Just by the door."

"Good. He'll know where to come. I'll get him. You sound hurt . . .?"

"Bit of a scrap. Miss Marly caught it worst. You might bring some first-aid stuff."

"Miss Marly! Is she still there?"

"In body only. Had a bad crack on the skull. And, Pepper she's no Bisley Boy, I'll guarantee!"

"Oh! I see. All right. You get back there, now. I'll be with you in ten minutes." Knowing Ken Wilson's driving, I had no doubt of it.

He was calm, too. I'd laid Miss Marly out on the settee, but he didn't as much as look at her. He went straight into the 'studio,' and stood, quite still, with his eyes shut, for a long moment. Then he sighed.

"Yes," he said, softly. "I was afraid of this. He was here."

"Who do you mean?" I asked, and he spun on me, his eyes hard.

"The black adept. He's here, in London. Hassim arrived home an hour ago, bringing the news from Egypt. Ramese Ferrars, who was the hireling of the Greek millionaire, Kristo Kropolis, who's web of power we broke—has been dismissed by his wealthy master. Because of us. Now he is here, in London, with a new gang. This is his work, his bid for vengeance."

"He's done all right, so far," I said, bitterly. "He has Yalna."

"Yes. I think we can assume that. The whole affair was obviously a plan to get her into his hands."

"But that must mean that she's in it, too," and I gestured to Miss Marly, out cold on the settee. "And that's a genuine wound, I'll swear. Rough treatment, for a hireling, isn't it?" He looked down, thoughtfully.

"Yes," he said, softly. "She's a part of it. We must take good care of her. I have the feeling she may be useful."

The remark had me completely baffled, and I was about to say so, when there came a quick heavy tread on the stairs. Ferguson had wasted no time. He strode in, with a glance for me, then Miss Marly.

"What happened?" he demanded, and I gave it to him as briefly as I could. I saw his face twitch at the mention of Ashley Cowle, and again as I described the fat man, but he said nothing until I was done.

"Have you touched anything, at all?"

"The door, the light switch. I picked up Miss Marly, to put her on the settee, here. Disturbed a bit of dust. Nothing much else."

"All right. Stay there." He went into the 'studio' room, and was back, in short order. "They never went down from yon window, but up and over. The marks are plain enough. Ay well, there's no more here, for me. I'll phone in for the duty man, and get a doctor for yon lassie."

"I'll take care of Miss Marly," Wilson offered, quickly.

"I canna do that," Ferguson frowned. "This is no' my case. I have to hand it on to the duty man . . ."

"May I disagree with you, Inspector," Wilson was quiet, but firm. "The mysterious bodies are your case, I think? And this is part and parcel with them. The same fine hand is involved. One we know all too well."

"Eh? Are you trying to tell me that this is some more of your confounded black magic . . . this, and the bodies?"

"Just that. Man—my niece has been abducted. Chappie, here, has been savagely beaten. Do you imagine I'd pursue my fancy to that extent? I'm not guessing, now. I know!" Ferguson savaged his chin with an irritable hand.

"All right!" he said, at last. "I'll take a chance on you. But I'll have to have some explanation, something that will make sense to my superiors. And I'll need to put some men on this anyway. I'm going to phone."

"We'll take Miss Marly home with us. Join us as soon as you can. There may not be much time for discussion or argument."

t h r e e

I managed to get Miss Marly into the back of the Rolls, on my own. Wilson refused to touch her, which was carrying his sensitivity a bit far, I thought, but I'm an infant, mentally, alongside him, and he had his own reasons, no doubt. One odd thought did occur to me, as we sped through the night.

"What's so special about the 'Veil of Isis,' Pepper?" I asked, and I was rewarded by the novelty of seeing him surprised, for once.

"Where the devil did you hear that?" he demanded.

"It was just about the last thing Yalna said, before they whipped her into that room. Apparently the Marly woman was full of it."

"Good heavens," he muttered, and his face was stony with tension. "So that is why he wants Yalna." He said no more, but the look on his face told me that it was serious, and I didn't press him.

Hassim was waiting for us when we arrived. Doctor Abdul Hassim Affir, Ph.D., as bland, bronzed, and beaming as ever, towering by the door. But the beam left his face when he saw the burden I carried. Swiftly for all his bulk, he brought hot water in a bowl, and first-aid materials. I laid her on our own settee and went to work on her without hesitation. Wilson stood aside, watching, somehow remote and withdrawn.

"It is Ram Ferrars, Hassim," he said, softly. "Beyond doubt. And he has taken Yalna, for the 'Veil of Isis'!" I saw Hassim's brown hand hesitate. He turned to look up, and his face was grim.

"That can only mean one thing, brother," he rumbled, deep in his throat. "Ferrars is out to destroy us, completely. Our only hope is to hit him first, before he is ready."

"Quite. And that lady is our only clue to his whereabouts." This was all over my head, but I could see something odd about her unconsciousness.

"She should have come round, long ago," I said. "She just lies there!"

"As if waiting. Like one in a trance, perhaps?"

"Whoever saw a trance like that?" I wondered, and Wilson sighed.

"Not many. Not in the last four thousand years," he said. That finished me completely. I decided to take my aching head upstairs and wash it. And my face.

In the bathroom mirror I looked a sight, but hot water and soap made me feel and look a lot more presentable. I was about to go down when I heard Wilson coming up, and Ferguson at his heels. The Inspector looked mutinous.

"You'll have to stop beating about the bush," he growled. "I canna keep on being led. I have to know what this is all about."

"Quite," Wilson murmured. "But you're a hard man to convince, you know. You must let me do it my way. Chappie, come with us, would you, into the lab. I want to be well away from long ears, downstairs."

"That's another thing," Ferguson grumbled. "You've got some bee in your bonnet about that lassie down there. How can she be involved? With that crack on the head, I'd say she's more victim than anything."

"All in good time," Wilson soothed. "Chappie, you'll find some paper and a pencil or two, in that drawer. Could you do us a quick sketch of that photographer, and the other chap?" I couldn't see his point, but it was something I could do, and I got on with it. After a moment or two, Hassim came up, with a tray of that excellent coffee he makes. I was glad to see it. Wilson gave him a quering look.

"Nothing, yet," Hassim said, gravely.

"All right. Bring her up when she does come round. Don't tell her anything." I finished the first rough sketch, and passed it across. I'm no great artist, but I can catch a likeness, and I wasn't likely to forget either of those two faces. I heard Ferguson growl at my work.

"That might be any one of a dozen folk," he said.

"But it isn't," Wilson murmured. "As I think even you will have to admit, in a moment." I finished the second, passed it on, and he handed it to Ferguson with no comment at all. The Inspector looked at it, and laughed, grimly.

"It's a fine likeness," he said. "That's the Battersea Boy, to the life. But . . ." and he bristled his eyebrows at me, "that's no' the chap you fought with, this night. It canna' be him!"

"Listen," I said, with some heat. "If that looks like this chap you call the Battersea Boy, he'd need a damn good alibi to convince me he was elsewhere. I'm not likely to forget that ugly mug in a long while."

"I fancy Ferguson has in mind the finest alibi in the world," Wilson said.

"You know something I don't, that's obvious," the Inspector frowned. "But you're right enough. As I happen to know, the Battersea Boy is dead, killed in a smashed up get-away car, fifteen years ago. I was there and saw it happen."

Well, I couldn't argue with that. But it had me floored. Unless this long dead thug had a double, and that was unlikely, to say the least. Wilson, however, seemed pleased, in a quiet way.

"Another long shot," he murmured. "I'd like to try just one more, Ferguson. Could you find out just where he's buried? Will it be in your records?" The Inspector looked at him as if he was raving mad, and I couldn't blame him.

"Doctor Wilson," he said, in measured tones, "I'm hoping there's going to be a ray of light, soon, in a' this talk. It just happens that I ken full well where the Boy is buried. There was some dispute about it, at the time . . ."

"Don't tell me," Wilson interrupted, quickly. "Let me tell you. He was buried in the Crompton Road cemetery, wasn't he?"

"I'm damned if I know how you guessed, but you're quite right."

"A guess? I suppose it was. At least, it will seem so, to you. To me, it has been a near certainty for some time. Ferguson . . ." his lean face was serious in the subdued light, ". . . I have no need to remind you that there are those with the power to seize control of the mind of another. You have seen it done. In that instance, we were fortunate enough to be able to break the web of control, to wipe out the black adept's organisation. But the man himself—Rameses Ferrars—he survived. Shorn of his power, because he works only through pawns. By himself, he is almost helpless. But he still lived. It was obvious, to me, that his first move would be to build up another organisation. And then—revenge. I have been expecting it, and have made some preparations. But his method, this time, is so hideously perverted that only a mind such as his could have conceived it. Even I was unwilling to accept it until Chappie mentioned the 'Veil of Isis.' Then I knew, for sure." He got up, suddenly, and went to stand with his back to the table.

"That was the Battersea Boy you fought with, Chappie. And that, also, was Ashley Cowle, Inspector. He had quite a

reputation, some seven or eight years ago, for being mixed up in just about every kind of devilry you could lay a tongue to. Drug parties, pervert gatherings, Satanism, that kind of thing. He died of an overdose of some filthy brew or other, but because there was money in the family, it was all discreetly hushed up."

"I mind it, now that you've given me the hint," Ferguson muttered. "We never did manage to pin anything on him. But, man, d'you know what you're saying?"

"I know. That is why I had to impress you with my long shots, to prepare your mind for the truth. That Ram Ferrars is calling up the dead!"

The more I thought about it, the more it made an insane kind of sense, and that weird vision I had, of bodies marching out of the cemetery, came back to me. But there were a host of objections, too.

"Ye mean . . . that's where a' the bodies came from?"

"Of course. The idea occurred to me almost as soon as you told us about them, although I dismissed it at once, naturally. Yet, I thought, how obvious and logical, if one wanted to produce large numbers of dead bodies in a hurry."

"But why? What the hell for?"

"Yes, that was the mystery. That's why I dismissed the notion. But only the police were finding them. That was obviously deliberate. So, someone wanted to embarrass the forces of law and order, to keep them busy—out of the way."

"It did that, right enough," Ferguson growled. "But it only takes us a step further back. Why would . . .?" and there came a discreet tap at the door. Wilson put a finger to his lips, and we turned to see Miss Marly, white-faced, and with a strip of plaster across her forehead and down one side of her face. Most of the grime had been brushed from her dress, and she stood steadily enough, but there was bewilderment in her eyes as she came into the light and found a chair. Hassim loomed silently behind her.

"What's happened? she said, jerkily, looking from me to Ferguson. "Why am I here?" Wilson had slipped away, silently, into the far gloom of the laboratory. Ferguson stuck out his jaw, belligerently.

"Now then, Miss Marly, we were hoping you'd be able to tell us," he said. "The way I've heard it, you and the photographer chap took Miss Wilson into a room purported to be a

studio, and when Mr. Jones, here, broke down the door and got in, you were on the floor, unconscious, and there was no sign of the others. Now, what have you to say to that?" She put a hand to her head.

"I'm sorry, I can't remember very well."

"Nay, that'll no' do for me, Miss," Ferguson's voice was coldly relentless. "You must recall something. You might explain, for instance, why you came here, why you spun that yarn about the fake studio, why you conspired to kidnap Miss Wilson, and who you're working for?" The 'why's' fell like blows, and as she looked up, I could see right into her green eyes. Again, I had that sense of wrongness, of a 'something' that looked out at me from beyond her stare. Then I saw Wilson, like a shadow, come out of the gloom, to stand by her shoulder, and his quiet, yet compelling, voice.

"I'd like you to look at this, Miss Marly," he said, and his hand showed, holding a piece of white card. It was so smoothly, so naturally done, that she had taken it and looked before we had time to realise—and she froze. It was breath-catching, the way she went suddenly immobile, like a wax image. A silent strain grew in the room, and I saw that she was shivering—vibrating would be a better word, like a plucked string. Then she gave a sort of whistling sigh, the card fell from her fingers, and she began to slump, like an unstuffed doll.

"Catch her, Hassim!" Wilson called, whipping round her chair like an eel. Hassim's great hands were there, at her shoulders, propping her up. Her head lolled like a puppet's, completely slack-lipped and lifeless, but Wilson, crouched at her knees, put out his hands, one either side of her temples, and touched. As Hassim stood back, we could feel the tremendous burst of energy being put forth.

"I've lost *him*!" Wilson whispered. "But I may be able to hold this lifeless clay for a moment." Looking over his shoulder as I was, I could see her face, saw it writhe and shift, hideously, senselessly, the eyes glassily vacant, rolling.

"Speak!" he commanded. "Speak! Where is he who sent you. Where is he, now? Speak!"

"What the devil's going on?" Ferguson muttered, getting up from his chair, only to slump back as Hassim pressed a firm hand to his chest.

"Quiet," he rumbled. "The girl is dead . . . but if anyone can make her speak, now, it is brother Kenneth. And we must

have the information." We held our breaths as that contorted face struggled to make words. A ghastly whistling sound came from the slack lips, and I strained to hear the words.

"Astwood . . . Astwood . . ." that's what it sounded like. And Wilson was now tiring. I could see the tremble of muscular fatigue in his fingers. At last, with a sigh, he let his hands fall, and the body of Miss Marly slumped again.

"Lay her out on the floor," he muttered. "I can do no more, and it was little enough." He got up, slowly, and now I could see that his brow was wet with sweat. Ferguson went to give Hassim a hand. I saw him feel for a pulse.

"Dead, right enough," he growled. "What the hell . . .?"

"That . . ." Wilson said, sombrely ". . . was a rather amateurish effort on my part to trap Ram Ferrars, who was watching us through the eyes of his tool. As you saw he broke away. Then I tried to control that abandoned body myself, to make it talk. But I am just not sufficiently advanced to be able to do such things. I have some knowledge, but only a little, and I am up against a master." He sounded more despondent than I had ever known him, and I had a dim idea why.

"She was our only link, our clue, to where Yalna is?" I guessed, and he nodded, silently. I confess my heart sank, too, at that. Somehow, Wilson's quiet confidence had always been there, to stand between me and the awful thought of Yalna in the clutches of the evil one. Now, even he was beaten.

"I still canna' believe it," Ferguson muttered. "Are you trying to tell me this was another o' the dead ones, called back to life?"

"Believe what you like!" Wilson said, shortly. "What does it matter?"

"Here!" the Inspector had a sudden thought. "What was on yon bit o' card?"

"It is an eye-lure. A simple device, but be careful with it . . ." for the Inspector had spotted it on the carpet, and was stooping to pick it up. Heedless of the warning, he turned it over, to look—and froze—just as Miss Marly had done. It was eerie to see him, standing there, quite motionless, staring at the white card. Not stopping to think, I stepped across to him.

"No, Chappie!" Wilson's voice fairly crackled. "Not you, too. Grab his shoulders and sit him down, but don't look at that card!" It was a surprising effort, not to look, but I

managed it, feeling very self-conscious. I felt that Wilson stepped close, to take it from Ferguson's nerveless grasp. When I dared to look at him again, he had slipped it into an open envelope, and was looking down at the Inspector, grimly.

"Now," he said, "I shall have to spend the next fifteen minutes or so in bringing him round. The fool!" It was the first time in many years that I had heard Wilson use that abusive tone about anyone. It must have showed, for he gave me a smile that cost him a lot of effort. "I'm sorry," he said. "That was inexcusable of me. But this is a devilish business, and that resuscitation effort is trying, bad for the nerves."

"It's all right. I don't blame you. Every time I think about Yalna, I want to hit somebody, too."

"Oddly enough," he smiled, but without humour, "I'm not worried about her. She is as precious to Ferrars as she is to us, and for the same reasons. My fear is the foul purpose he will use her for—against us," and he went off into the gloom, to return with an oddly designed hand-lamp. I managed to recognise it, with a second look, but its purpose had me guessing. He caught my eye.

"You know what this is?"

"Yes. It's a stroboscopic lamp. Seen them used in engineering. But that is as far as I go." He held it before the Inspector's blank face.

"A flickering light," he said, "at the right speed to match a person's brain-scanning rhythms, will produce strange results. Geometric illusions, dizziness, even convulsions, sometimes. It will also break down the hypnotic effect of the eye-lure, if I can find the right frequency. I used this, in fact, while drawing the thing out, to avoid being caught, myself."

"Is that what it is, then? Just a drawing?"

"That's all. The eye is caught and held by certain focal patterns. You know, yourself, how, in any design, the eye automatically goes to a circle or a heavy dot? It's a development from that. A fascination diagram. A very useful thing, but dangerous in the wrong hands." I stepped back to let him get on with the task of finding the critical rhythm.

Hassim stood by me, watching, and his usually bland face was gloomy, too. I felt helpless, but curious, too.

It was more for something to say than anything else, when I asked him, "Hassim, there's something that puzzles me. About that calling up the dead. Pepper has said it, and I'm

ready to believe it, but surely a body decays, in the grave, doesn't it?"

"Yes. That is why the old ones were so careful about embalming. They believed in the literal resurrection of the body."

"But didn't they remove some of the vital organs, first?"

"They did. It was for a definite reason. Certain vital organs were removed and hidden, so that only the dead man's spirit would know where they were. That was to prevent any interloper seizing and controlling the body. This is old knowledge, forgotten and obscure, for the most part, but still preserved among a secret few. It seems that Ram Ferrars has it."

"Yes, but that still doesn't explain about the bodies of modern people, and the decay." Wilson, still crouched in front of Ferguson, turned his head.

"Ferrars," he said, "has all the old knowledge, but he has, also, modern science to augment his powers. You may have heard that archaeologists, when they find long-buried remains of metal objects—say a pot, or a sword—are able, if the ground has not been disturbed, to restore the decayed object by a form of electrolysis. They pass a current of electricity through the corroded mass—the process of chemical breakdown is halted, reversed, and the original object restored, exactly as it was. That, on a more elaborate scale, and with a few devil-tricks of his own, is what Ram Ferrars is doing. That is how he has produced all the bodies which have been embarrassing Ferguson, here. When it comes to controlling those bodies, however, that is a different—ah!—that's got him," for the Inspector had begun to writhe and pant, for all the world like a half-drowned man coming back to consciousness. Wilson stood back, clicked off the lamp.

"I know quite a lot," he said, bitterly, "but not the essential thing. All we have is 'Astwood,' and that's not enough. And, while we're wasting time here, Ram Ferrars is readying to strike."

Ferguson was calmer, now. "By jings . . ." he muttered, and rubbed his head "that damned design. I couldn't stop looking at it."

"Forget it," Wilson advised. "We have more pressing, although no more pleasant problems. We must get a line on Yalna, somehow. If only 'Astwood' meant anything significant!"

"Eh?" Ferguson stared. "You mean, what the lassie said? Surely now, she meant Astwood House, didn't she? I thought it was obvious."

"To you, no doubt," Wilson snapped. "You're a detective. These things are your stock in trade. Well, man, where is it?"

"Astwood House is an old, abandoned place, been empty for years, just on the south side of Crompton Road, right by the cemetery."

"That's it, then. Good enough. She's there."

"Here!" Ferguson cried, in some alarm, "What are you going to do, then?"

"Hassim, and I, and I think I can assume Chappie will come, too. We are going to break into Astwood House, now, just as soon as we can get there. No time to be lost. I can't ask you to be a party to it, Ferguson, obviously, but I do ask you not to interfere." He had gone to a drawer as he was speaking, to, produce a handful of small, glittering objects, like tiny eggs laying them on the table top. He handed one to me.

"I have been making some slight preparations against this day," he said. "Hold it so, give it a quarter-turn, and it's switched on. It is a scrambler. Puts out a jamming-field which will effectively stop anyone from trying to take charge of your mind." It was quite small, like two thimbles put mouth to mouth, yet heavy. I put it in my pocket. I confess I felt a quickening of my pulse at the thought of positive action. But Ferguson bit his lip, rubbed his chin.

"By jings," he said. "I wish I was coming with you."

"You'd be a fool to do it," Wilson said, crisply. "Quite obviously, Ferrars has gone to a lot of trouble to avoid an outright clash with the law. All those bodies he gave you to play with, were meant to keep you busy. It must have been a shock to him to know that you are here, right now."

"Ay, but how . . .? Och, you mean . . . through her! Forbye, that's hard to believe, even now."

"Yet it is true. He has seen you. If you interfere, now, he will see to it that you suffer . . ."

"Quiet!" Hassim rumbled, and we hushed. The telephone was ringing, downstairs. I glanced at my watch. Just on midnight. Who could be ringing us, at this hour? Ferguson frowned.

"It'll be for me, likely," he said. "I left word I'd be here," he went out, following Hassim's silent tread.

four

Wilson was busy with yet another drawer and a flat box, like a portable radio, with a rod sticking out of one end, and a trailing wire from the other. The flex ended in a metal-coil handgrip, the kind of thing you see on a stove.

"It's a crude direction-finder," he explained, as he wound the flex round the box for easier carrying. "Hold the handgrip, point the aerial, move it about, until you get a reaction. Call it mental radar, if you like. With it I can detect any unusual transmission of mental power, up to about a mile. It may come in useful if it's a big house. I think that's everything. Come on."

I followed him downstairs, to find Ferguson, sour-faced, in the lounge.

"That was the Assistant Commissioner," he grunted. "Somebody has just been on to him, threatening to give the 'body' story to the papers, in the morning."

"He knew about it, already, of course?"

"Ay . . . I've kept him informed, and he's as anxious as me that it shouldn't leak out. But this has forced his hand. He's just given me a tongue-lashing, told me to get off my bottom and get some action." He glared at us. "This convinces me," he said. "Yon Ferrars that you keep on about—this is his doing—to keep me out of the way. And I don't like that kind of thing. Makes me pig-headed, if you follow me? Doctor Wilson, I'd like to join your little party. Nay . . ." and he grinned sardonically, ". . . I'll do better. Give me twenty minutes, and the use of your phone, and I can bring a squad of hand-picked men with me. We do a bit of house-breaking, in the police, you know. Strictly between us, mind. And we're good at it. What d'ye say?" Wilson put a hand in his pocket, drew out a scrambler and handed it to him.

"Meet us outside Astwood House," he said, quietly. "We'll wait for you. I hope you won't regret this, Ferguson."

As I sat by Wilson in the car, and we fled through the night, an odd and puzzling thought came to me.

"How the dickens is he getting bodies out of a cemetery, wholesale, without being detected, Pepper?"

"I don't know. One would think that the caretakers would have noticed. Nor do I know how we shall get into the cemetery, if we have to. As I remember, it has a high steel fence, and the gates will be locked." Which gave me another

odd thought. Why do we fence off and lock up a graveyard? It may have been necessary, a century ago, to defeat men like Burke and Hare, but not now, surely?

Then we were slowing down, and I peered out at the long, high-walled road, agleam in the tall standard lamps. And I could see another problem. To say that Astwood House was on the south side of the cemetery was to say very little. It left us with a half-mile of houses to fish from. Wilson drew the car in to the side of the road.

"Keep your eye out for the possible pedestrian," he warned. He got out, and he had the radar things in his hand. Shutting his eyes, he held out the box, and rotated, slowly. Suddenly, he stopped, swung back a shade.

"That's it," he said. "Care to try it, Chappie?" I didn't, frankly, but it was an experience I might never meet again. I held it as he had done, turning well away from the angle he'd found, and shut my eyes. I felt foolish, but nothing else, as I swung, slowly. And then a wave of sheer, shocking terror hit me like a kick in the stomach, and I opened my eyes, to find that I had lined up with the same angle he had found. He looked at me, sympathetically.

"Not very nice, is it? But positive. The fear, of course, is a blanket precaution, just to discourage stray prowlers. Right, you hang on to it while we crawl along. Let's narrow it down a bit."

By the time we came to the end of the houses, and to a narrow side-street, the fear-wave was almost tangible, like a chill mist. Hassim's great voice rumbled from the rear seat.

"No need of an instrument, Kenneth. I can feel that revulsion quite plainly. It must be this house, here." Wilson put the Rolls snugly in by the brick wall of a great dark pile, lying back from the road. He shut off the engine, and I put down the radar, but, like Hassim, I could still feel that miasma of fear. The night air was thick with it.

"We can be in no doubt, at any rate," Wilson said, quietly, "and Ferguson and his men will not be on a wild-goose chase." Which, I thought, was very nice for Ferguson, but didn't make me feel any happier. I was thinking of Yalna. In that stink of evil, the thought that she was held prisoner in the middle of it, and all because of my folly with the Marly woman, didn't help any.

"Right, Chappie," Wilson said, briskly. "From the top of the car, you should be able to see over the wall. Up you go. Quietly, and watch for glass."

"Nothing to see," I reported. "All dark and quiet."

"Naturally," Wilson murmured, "but, for a deserted house, someone's been doing a lot of gardening," and then I recognised the smell. Freshly turned earth. I dropped to the ground, to stand by the other two, alongside the bonnet of the Rolls. "Gardening . . ." Wilson mused. "Now . . . I wonder whether they were burying something, or digging it up?" and the simple query made a cold shiver run up my spine. We waited for the Inspector. It seemed an age, but was only a minute and a quarter, by my watch, before we heard the car purr to a halt. A step.

"Wilson?" Ferguson's voice came. "No need to ask if this is the right place. Man, I can feel the creep of it. You ready?"

"We were waiting for you. Chappie has had a look. Nothing to be seen. If you tuck in close, you should be able to go up and over from the roof of your car. That's what we're going to do."

We three mounted our car, and cleared the worst of the glass with a tyre-lever. The fresh-earth smell was very clear. I thought, again, of graves, and shuddered. A light winked, to my left, and I went up and over, silently, to land in soft earth. Half-expecting it, I saved myself from falling, and went forward step after step, in soft soil.

"Like a ploughed field," I whispered to Wilson, on my left.

"Not quite," he replied. "It's a solid, underneath." We reached the side of the house without incident, and gathered together.

"Some garden," Ferguson muttered. "It's a' flower-beds."

"Chance your torch over it," Wilson suggested. "It felt to me like loose soil spread over a lawn." I saw a loop of light skim over the dark brown surface.

"By jings!" Ferguson gasped. "It looks like it."

"Where the devil did it all come from?" wondered a voice that I recognised as that of sergeant Smith. "I do a fair bit of gardening, when I've the time, and this stuff smells sour, to me. As if it had come from a deep trench. But there's a hell of a lot of it . . ." At that moment there came a sudden, scorching wave of pure hate, so viciously evil that it was like a physical blow. In that foul flood I could do nothing but cling to the rough wall and sweat, struggling to fight it off. Then, just as suddenly, it was gone, and the quiet night seemed to echo as I gasped in relief.

"God's mercy!" Ferguson choked. "What was that?"

"That was just the fringe," Wilson said, grimly. "Just the spill-over from a bolt that was beamed at me, in my home. Ferrars has begun his attack. Come, we mustn't wait any longer. He will soon discover that I am not where he thinks I am, and he will begin searching. At that level of intensity, he will destroy Yalna. No human form can transmit that degree of emotion for very long. We must find a window."

"Then we make for the cellars," Hassim rumbled, "for that is where he is."

"Window here, sir," Smith muttered. "Give us a flash . . . that's it," and I heard a click, and the squeal of a protesting sash. In the torch-light, I saw his heels disappear as he dived through. Then the light died as Ferguson went after him. And it was my turn to rest my chest on the low sill, lean over, and slide to touch the floor with my hands. There came the quick, thudding pad of many bare feet, a body threw itself on my neck, another across my back, and I had to slither forward, or be broken like a stick. On my face, and I was flattened under more bodies, squirming from the clutch of searching, tearing fingers, hearing the hoarse grunts of struggle.

It was like being dragged into a den of wild animals, and I was too damnably scared to give a thought to finesse, or fair fighting. I found the wrist of the hand that dug for my eyes, and broke it. Teeth sank into my leg, and I kicked something, hard. I laid hold of the arm that was throttling me, and heard the bones crack as I snapped it.

I manged, desperately, to get up on one knee, and a hairy head butted my face. Tears sprang to my eyes, but I got that head, and twisted. For a few hot seconds, I think I was insane, as I grabbed, and wrenched, and tore, and got free of the silent, clutching, murderous hands that came at me. Then I was standing, with my back to the wall, sobbing for breath, ready to smash the next 'thing' that laid a finger on me. And it was the total wordlessness of it all that was the most frightening thing. Grunts and gasps, and the stamp and stagger of feet, the thud and thump of blows, but not a word. I saw Ferguson's torch striking out swoops of light as he used it to batter at the wild-eyed creatures that ringed him round.

I shoved away from the wall and went shambling across to give him a hand, but a firm touch on my shoulder stayed me.

"Let me," Wilson said, firmly, and he put out a hand to touch the nearest one. It stiffened, and then fell, limply. He

touched another, and another. "Give me your torch. Ferguson," he said, and took it, to flash round. "Switch on the scrambler I gave you. Hold it in one hand. Touch them with the other . . ."

We saw sergeant Smith, in a corner, lashing out desperately at three of them. I went to his aid, Hassim at my side. Then, pantingly, we counted them. There were ten, altogether. Seven male, three female. I couldn't think of them as men and women, they were so thick with grime and filth. All stark naked. And all dead. Again.

"Reserves," Wilson said, softly. "Spares, kept here like animals, like watchdogs. Animated and given a single, blind command, to attack any intruder. Just our luck, to pick this room. But think, if it had been a common burglar!" I felt sorry for sergeant Smith. He was just now finding out, from Ferguson's breathless and profane explanation, that he had been fighting dead bodies. He looked sick. The idea was making my stomach squirm, too. Wilson dived a hand in his pocket, produced another scrambler for the sergeant.

"We are reasonably immune so long as we have these," he said. "Come, we must find the cellars. No need to call for reinforcements, yet, and the fewer who know about all this, the better."

We went out of the room, into a chilly, blue-papered passage, and the torch-light showed tracks, and freshly-spilled earth, in the dust. I think I caught the significance of this just before Ferguson did, although Hassim and Wilson must have seen it almost from the first.

"By God!" the Inspector growled, "I'm getting it, now. Tunnels, from the cellars, into the cemetery—to get the coffins out, from below! The crafty swine!"

We came to steps which led down into echoing dark, and there was a chill dampness in the air. By the torch-light I could see bottle-racks and bins, long since abandoned, relics of a more gracious age. And then the torch was lowered. Wilson, side by side with Ferguson, in the lead, halted us.

"Broken racks, here," he murmured. "They must have been used for timbering. We're getting near. I shall douse the light. Cautiously . . ." We groped forward, in darkness. Then there was a feeble glow, off to one side. I moved up alongside Wilson and the Inspector, to peer into the flickering yellow of candle-light.

"That's no tunnel," Smith muttered, over my shoulder. "It's a room of some kind." And he was right. We were looking through a narrow doorway some six feet six high, by a yard wide, into a dim-lit chamber with rough-finished white walls. It had a functional look. I'd seen the like, before.

"Generating plant," I whispered. "They must have had an oil-powered generator, here, to make their own juice. You can see the plinth-pieces, where it must have stood, under that trestle thing."

"That trestle-thing," Wilson said, "is what we are after. It's an altar, and, unless I'm desperately mistaken, that is Yalna, on it." It was hard to be certain, in that miserable light, for the only illumination was from candles set in sconces all round the rough walls, at waist-level. All I could see was a long, still, slender form, stretched out, and covered with a filmy gauze sheet.

"That gauze . . ." I wondered, ". . . is it optical illusion, or is that thing really changing colour all the time?"

"The Veil of Isis," Hassim growled. "Few indeed, have seen that and lived to tell. Modern science speculates about a force-field, but Ancient Egypt had one four thousand years ago. Woven into patterns of mind-force, it steals living essence from the wearer, to be directed where the adept wills. This is what Ram Ferrars is using Yalna for, to direct his evil forces at us."

"He is also using it, and her, to animate and control his undead slaves. That is how he is able to energise and direct so many at a time. I can't see any sign of him. He must be down one of the tunnels . . ." I caught a glimpse of a statue-like figure, just inside the door.

"Look!" I whispered, "and there's another one on the other side."

"More watchdogs," he said, nodding. "All right. No time like the present. I'm going to make a dash for it," and he drew out a scrambler.

I heard the faint click, saw him jerk his hand, and the glittering ovoid made an arc, to fall and bounce in the doorway. The two silent watchers toppled, slowly, like unstuffed dolls, to the ground.

"Now!" Wilson snapped, and went forward like an arrow, with Ferguson hot on his heels. Then several things happened, all at once. Over Wilson's hunched shoulder I caught a flash of glaring red—a robe—and a figure just emerging from a

tunnel. And a blast of hate hit me, stopped me in my tracks like hitting a wall headlong. I saw Ferguson stagger and spin, and go down on a knee. Past him, Wilson was doubled up like a man kicked in the wind. Then vision blurred as I struggled against that blinding wave of insane hate. It battered me down to my knees, drove a silent scream through my head, and I was crawling, all sense gone except the dumb determination to go on. Then I heard a screeching rumble, from over my head.

I was alongside Ferguson, and he too, twisted his head to look up. His face was a grinning mask of agonised effort. From up there a shining blade of metal was dropping down on us. I wriggled back, frantically, trying to drag the Inspector with me, for he had gone out, altogether, face down on the concrete. A strong hand grabbed my ankle, and heaved. We slid back, painfully, and a grey wall of steel thudded to the ground in front of our noses. It was less than an inch from Ferguson's outflung hand. Then, blessed relief, that scalding ocean of hate snapped off. For a long moment I lay quite still, putting myself back together again. I could feel Hassim kneeling beside me, could hear him pound on that door.

"Wasting your time," I groaned, and I could have wept at the thought, "It's a safety door—against fire hazard. Not a chance of breaking that down. We've had it. The swine has got Yalna—and Wilson—and there isn't a damn thing we can do about it!" I managed to sit up, feeling about a thousand years old. In the torch-light I saw Smith, grey-faced, helping Ferguson to do the same. The Inspector was snorting like a man in extremis, but he was conscious, and anything but beaten.

"Smithy," he croaked, "never mind about me, man. Awa' wi' ye, and get Colly, on the double, wi' a' his gear. Tell him there's a steel door to get through. He'll ken what to bring."

five

There was a clatter, and the dancing light of the torch.

"All right, then," came a chirpy Cockney voice, "let's have a look at it," and I saw Colly, by the light of the torch. A cigarette dangled from his lip, and his face was lean and knowing as he felt the door, rapped it with a knuckle.

"It's in slots, eh?" he muttered, calculatingly, "Won't be any good cutting across. The top half will fall down. Get in the way. You want a wedge out. Won't take a tick."

He unlimbered an oxy-acetylene torch, fed from twin bottles on his back. I saw him twist a knob, take the cigarette from his lip put it to the jet, and there was a 'pop,' and a thirty inch bloom of bright yellow flame lit up the cellar, to blind us. He adjusted another knob, carefully. The big flame shrank, became blue haze, and roared, surrounding a tiny needle of electric blue.

Almost casually, he clipped dark goggles to his nose and turned that intense blue flame on the dull door, at a point about four feet from the ground. There grew a red glow, then there was another 'pop,' and a sudden cascade of sparks. He began to draw a line diagonally, to the bottom left. I imagined the spurt of hot sparks there must be on the other side, and wondered what Ram Ferrars was making of it. I didn't have to wonder long. Colly had hardly cut an inch when we were hit and staggered by another wave of feral hatred.

"Cor . . . blimey !" he retched, dropping the torch, and would have fallen, had it not been for Hassim, who reached out and touched him on the back of the neck with its huge hand. Although his bronze face was wet with effort, his deep voice was strong and steady.

"Be strong," he said. "Don't let a bad smell stop you." It was suggestion, of course, and I suppose it was easier for Colly to understand a bad smell than an offensive thought-wave. At any rate, it worked. He caught up the torch again, and resumed work, with a cheerful grumble.

"You might have warned me, mate," he said. "That's enough to turn a feller's guts, that is."

As the spray of sparks resumed, the hate-blast died away. It was only a matter of moments, then, before the two legs of the inverted 'V' were cut, in the door. The slab of metal fell in with a clang. For all his bulk, Hassim was through, in a flash, and I was right after him, dodging the hot metal edge. I sensed that Smith was after me, but I was too tense to bother much. At the very least, I expected another blast of that sickening hate, but it didn't come. But, from tunnels in all the three walls, came a silent, fearsome horde of staring, grey-faced, clay-stained, naked figures, of either sex and all ages. Silent, and with but one object in their dulled, half-alive minds.

Hassim went down under a pile of them before he could reach the altar, and there were plenty more to throw themselves on me. I had my scrambler in my hand. It grew hot to the

touch. And hotter, as my attackers fell. I threw it, reached for the spare I'd picked up, and it was hot, too, almost too hot to hold. I tried juggling it from hand to hand as more bodies scrambled over the fallen, but it was in vain. I had to drop it. More bodies fell, but there were two more for every one down, a host of replacements. They broke over me like a wave. Hands reached, grappled, tore and clawed, knees and elbows and sheer weight of bodies, and I was down, and fighting for my life.

"Break their bones," came Hassim's huge voice, half-smothered but unshaken. "Even the deathless cannot fight with broken limbs." It was sound advice, as I'd already found. But the word 'deathless' struck deep. These things were not to be hurt, or stunned, or killed, in the usual sense—because they were just automata, powered by Yalna's vital energy, and directed by Ram Ferrars' evil brain. And the supply was virtually unlimited, no matter how I wrenched, and twisted and snapped. Like the Battersea Boy, they grunted, but kept on coming. I had an awful picture of a horde like this let loose on the world of everyday people. There would be no stopping them, no more than I could stop them, now. I knew sinking despair. It was all over, for me. I was within scant feet of that altar, but it might as well have been miles.

I had completely forgotten Colly until my glazing eyes caught the glare of yellow flame through a tangle of arms and legs. Then I learned that even a senseless, brainless zombie will back off from a thirty-inch flame thrust in its face. In a matter of seconds the whole picture changed dramatically, and we were backed into a close corner behind that brandishing, hissing flame, and facing a solid wall of sullen, dull-eyed menace.

"Yon scrambler gadget didna' work very well," Ferguson panted, dabbing at a purpling bruise on his cheek. His face was filthy with dirt and blood. "I had to fling it awa'. It was hot!" By him, the sergeant, in a shocking state, echoed his words. Hassim nodded, without turning his face from the mob.

"They would have been enough to nullify a simple thought-wave," he muttered, "but this is on a different order of magnitude. Even Ram Ferrars couldn't energise so many bodies without aid. That is why he is using the Veil . . . why the scramblers were overloaded . . . and why we *must* get to that altar. Once there, and the Veil destroyed, we will be free of this pack, at least."

He was standing on Colly's left, and I on the right, and only that hissing yellow-hot jet of flame stood like a fiery sword between us and the mob.

"Can't keep this up much longer, gents," he said, matter-of-factly. "It's only a portable kit." That settled it for me.

"We'll have to make a dash for it," I said. "Colly, you go in front, and Hassim and I will cover your back . . ." and even as I said it I realised it was hopeless. Five of us just couldn't hide behind one flame. But none of the others could think of anything better, so, with a deep breath, and a prayer of hope, we made a mad rush. The pack opened up, and washed back over us, and the next few seconds were hectic. I saw Hassim get to within inches of that shimmering veil, and go down under a writhing mass of flesh. Colly swung to help, and I shambled, dragging bodies with me, to cover his back. Sheer weight and inertia did it.

All at once I felt a snapping tingle in my fingers. I had my hand on that web of power. I clutched, desperately, even as I went down. It seemed that I could feel a slackening, a loss of frenzy, in the thrashing bodies which weighed on me, and I was able, grunting, to get on to my feet again. Colly, like a madman, was swiping with his torch, ducking and hunching as he kept looking over his shoulder.

"Here !" I gasped, thrusting the filmy stuff at him, "this . . . burn it. Go on, man, burn it !" For all its gossamer texture, it was strong enough to catch and drag and tangle in the thrashing limbs all round me, but he managed to get hold of the end. He put the torch to it. It flared, soundlessly, like flash-paper, the flame slipping back, snaking in amongst the tangled, twisted bodies. And they were suddenly stilled, collapsing, folding, falling, sagging to the ground.

"Cor !" Colly said, with a near-hysterical giggle. "They've all packed up. Gorn off to sleep !" I was close to hysteria myself as I realised that he had no idea what he had been fighting. Then all that was thrust aside in my concern for Yalna. Eyes closed, arms by her side, she lay still as death, her naked body rigid and cold as ice. I went to pick her up, but Hassim, regaining his feet, was quick to stop me.

"We dare not move her, yet," he said, and as he leaned over, blood trickled down his cheek from claw-marks. A drop fell from his chin, to splat redly on her white skin. "See ?" he said "She is still in the grip of Ferrars," and I saw the slim gold

chain that circled her neck and lay across her bosom. On it was a stunted black figurine of the jackal-headed Anubis, God of the Dead. "We must break that. Give me your hand, Chappie. Brace the chain so that it doesn't cut into her flesh." We set our heads together, for rigidity, and I took as firm a grip as I could on the slack at my side. He put his great hands on the other, giving a gentle tug to make sure we had a firm hold.

"What d'you think happened to Wilson?" came a breathless croak from Ferguson. "We should be looking for him, forbye."

"There are six tunnels," Hassim said, without looking up. "Ferrars has him, you may be sure, and we might search for hours. But I know a quicker way to bring the rat from his trap, wherever he is. Ready, Chappie?" I grunted assent, and he jerked once, with great force. The chain bit into my hand, and I staggered back . . . but it had broken, and I had the loop with the figurine. "Pass it to Colly," he ordered. "Quickly. He must burn it." Colly took the little black thing, set it on the concrete, and began adjusting his controls. I could have watched him, but Hassim was not done with me, yet. As we were stood, either side of the trestle which served as altar, he reached his hand to me.

"Your left hand," he said, grimly, "and you take her left in your right." He caught her right hand as he spoke . . . so that we formed a closed circle of three. We were just in time. Hardly had Hassim taken my hand in his when there came that revolting, stunning blast of hate again. I shook, but Hassim's fingers held mine like steel. From the dark mouth of the tunnel directly opposite us came that red, garish robe, ornate with twisted black and gold designs, and the man inside it was the photographer, Ashley Cowle, his pale, high-domed face a mask of evil. His arms went up, fingers crooked into claws, and that scalding wash of evil grew until my knees felt like water.

I sensed Ferguson and Smith sagging, reeling, going down to their knees, and I could hear Colly, squatting on the floor, giggling like a maniac. But the strong fingers gripped mine all the tighter, and Hassim's huge voice rolled out.

"Give me your strength, Chappie, my friend . . . your power . . . your life . . . everything you have. Think of the black Anubis . . . see it burn . . . see it destroyed. Colly! Burn it . . . burn it!" and he began to chant, in great thundering sounds and syllables of a language strange to me, but which

made the hair stand up on my head. The great rumbling echoed round that dim-lit chamber. I saw Cowle's white face split in a grin of strain and effort, his eyes aflame with evil power. Yalna's hand twitched in mine, and grew warm . . . and then it was as if a huge hand wrapped me round and squeezed, as if to press out the very juices of my life. Hassim fell silent, and the silence grew, and thickened. And I heard Colly.

"The bloody thing . . ." he babbled, like a frustrated child-mind ". . . it won't burn . . . it won't burn . . ." The flame of his torch hissed and roared as he fumbled with the settings, chuckling and babbling the while. Then Ashley Cowle's face changed, was wrenched into spasms. His upflung arms, widespread, shook and sagged. That high-domed brow was suddenly wet with sweat. By my feet there was a sudden 'crack,' and Cowle's red robe burst into flames like a petrol-soaked rag, roaring like a furnace. He screamed, such a scream as I never want to hear again, and fell, in a charred and smouldering heap.

"That's it," I croaked, "isn't it? I mean . . . it's all finished?"

"For the time," he said, wearily. "For the time . . . but that is all. If you will see to the others, I will go and look for Kenneth. He will be in that tunnel, I think." He stepped away from the trestle-altar, and almost fell. It was obvious that he was almost whacked as I was.

"Hold on, old man," I mumbled. "You'd be mad to chance it, alone. Get the Inspector, and Smithy, to give you a hand." He nodded, and turned back, to help them up. As I spread the remnants of my torn and filthy jacket over Yalna's body, the three of them ducked into the tunnel, to reappear, quite soon, dragging the inert figure of Ken Wilson. That shook me from my weary slump, but Hassim caught my movement, and smiled.

"It is quite all right, Chappie. Kenneth is unhurt. He was wise enough to retreat where even RamFerrars could not follow. Lay him down there, Inspector, and let me have a minute . . ." We watched, anxiously, as he bent over the body and made deft, sure movements.

"Ah, praise be for that!" for Wilson was sitting up, white-faced and strained, but none the worse, otherwise. One quick glance round put him in the picture. He got to his feet.

"Protective trance," he explained, softly. "There is a time when gestures are folly, and flight is the only sane act. You saw what he did with Yalna. He'd have been able to use me in the same way, had I tried to fight him. Let me look at her," and he came to stand by the trestle, and to make quick exploratory touches with his surgeon's fingers. After a while, he straightened up. "Just exhaustion," he said. "She'll be none the worse, after a rest. Now, what's the next thing?"

"Ay!" Ferguson sighed. "You might well ask. There's a' this lot to be squared up and put awa' tidy." He laughed, without humour, as he looked round at the grotesque sight of piled and tangled bodies. "We'll no' be able to keep *this* out o' the papers, I'm thinking. The A.C. will be fit to be tied!"

"Not necessarily," Wilson disagreed, quickly. "There's more involved here than just a crime. The Assistant Commissioner . . . that's Sir Cyril Coke, isn't it?" Ferguson grunted assent, and Wilson nodded, thoughtfully. "I know him, to speak to. We are members of the same club. He is reputed to be a sensible and practical man. I think there are aspects of this which may strike him as justifying extreme measures. Come, let's get Yalna to the car and home, and we'll ring him up."

So we made our way out, me carrying Yalna, Smith assisting Colly, and a rare sight we would have been, had there been anyone to see. It took only a moment for Ferguson to post the rest of his men as guards over the house, and then we headed for home, at top speed.

We had hardly been indoors ten minutes and Yalna was conscious enough to sit up, and smile, and tell us what little she knew, when the A.C. was with us. A medium-tall man, not too obtrusively military, with his close-brushed hair thick with silver, Sir Cyril wasted no time in displays of surprise or emotion. Once the introductions were made, he sat quite still, between Ferguson and Wilson, and heard their combined and concise account. His first comment raised my respect for him considerably.

"How many bodies, altogether, would you say?"

"There was about fifty in that room," Ferguson guessed. "Ten in the ground floor room. Eighteen that were found, what started it all. Call it eighty."

"'pon my soul!" Sir Cyril muttered, grimly. "It hardly seems possible. Still, Wilson, I know you, by repute. Sound man. Good enough for me. Now this must be hushed up. No

question of that. Think of distress to relatives, eh? Dash it, I've got relatives of my own, in Crompton. Understood, Ferguson? You take what men you need. Pick 'em for discretion. Roust out the cemetery officials, for records, assistance. Any complaints, refer them to me. Get on with it!" Ferguson left, almost at once, with sergeant Smith. After they'd gone, Sir Cyril got to his feet.

"Noticed one curious omission, Wilson," he said. "You didn't say you'd finished off this Ferrars chap. Why not, eh? Think he'll bob up again?"

"I'm absolutely certain he will, when he's ready. As always, he was using pawns. He was using the body of Ashley Cowle. I think we've hurt him rather badly, but he'll come back. He must. It's the nature of the evil one."

"So you'll take no chances, eh? Be alert? Very wise. That's what I was coming to. Not for me to give you orders, as a general thing, but this is too big to be personal. Thing like this mustn't happen again. Must ask that you co-operate with us, in future."

"In what way, exactly?"

"Keep in touch. I'll give you a private phone number. You'll keep a look-out, in any case. Common sense, that is. But, at the first signs of anything a bit fishy, you call us in. You follow me?"

"I understand," Wilson said, very quietly. "May I assume that the agreement is reciprocal? That you will inform us . . . at the first signs of anything unusual? It might help. It would have helped, in this case."

"A point," Sir Cyril nodded. "Yes, a point. Irregular, but yes, all right. Confidential, mind. But we'll have the beggar, yet. Dead bodies . . .! Can't have that kind of thing!"

And he took his leave, ram-rod straight and satisfied in his own mind. Wilson smiled, wearily, as we gathered ourselves to get what sleep we could out of the remainder of the dark hours.

—John Rackham

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